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DANDY ROCK'S RIVAL; or, THE HUNTED MAID OF TAOS.

BY GEORGE WALDO BROWNE,

AUTHOR OF "THE DREAD RIDER," "THE TIGER OF TAOS," "DANDY ROCK," "THE MAD MINER," "THE GOLDEN HAND," "DANDY ROCK'S PLEDGE," ETC., ETC.



THE SOLITARY PURSUER WAS A HUGE GRAY WOLF CROUCHING UPON THE BACK OF A FLEET FOOTED MUSTANG.

Dandy Rock's Rival;

OR,

The Hunted Maid of Taos.

BY G. WALDO BROWNE,
AUTHOR OF "DANDY ROCK," "DREAD RIDER,"
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CHAPTER I.

A STRANGE RIDER.

"Ho, boys! for the Vale of Taos!"

The speaker was standing upon the summit of Hibidau Pass, where a break in the "Alps of America" makes it tolerable easy crossing the range which, continuing on toward the south, forms the connecting link of the stupendous chains of the Andes and the Rocky Mountains.

Away to the eastward stretches a vast "rolling prairie" of dreary barrenness, until it reaches the fertile valley of the mighty Mis-souri, nearly a thousand miles distant. Looking down upon the boundless expanse from this lofty height, nothing is seen but the solitary traces of the weary waste; every *motte* of timber or line of growth that dots here and there the lowlands, marking the course of some river, is lost in the magnitude of the distance, while the side of the mountain rising nearly perpendicular leaves no intervening ridges to hide the view.

Westward the beholder gazes upon an extensive arena of broken mountain ranges from which untold isolated peaks uprear their snow-crowned heads.

Thus upon every hand the scene is weird, picturesque and lonely, its grandeur unsurpassed by any landscape in the wild West.

The words we have given were spoken by a person of not more than one and twenty, with a tall form of splendid proportions, and a handsome countenance that, while it indicated a genial nature, ever ready to give or take a good share of humor, was unmistakably stamped with the resolution of a determined will. His hair was dark, falling down his shoulders at a considerable length, while he wore a mustache of the same hue. He was dressed in the picturesque garb of a mountaineer, hunting shirt, leggings, and all beautifully beaded and frilled by the deft fingers of some squaw, while he was armed with a long, double-barreled rifle, a pair of pistols and brace of keen-bladed knives. Standing by the side of a clean-limbed, strongly built horse all caparisoned as if for a journey, he seemed the *beau ideal* of a plainsman.

With an eye that could gaze at the mid-day sun in all its splendor and not flinch, a frame that defied fatigue and exposure, and the courage of a lion, his name was already well known in that region, while he has gained since no less than a dozen cognomens. He was Rock Randal, younger than when we have ever met him before, but the same generous-hearted Rock.

Three companions were standing by his side. One not far from his own age, and so nearly like him in dress and bearing, that he would have passed for a brother. He was called Reckless Ray at the time we speak of, though since he has become, under another name, one of our most noted scouts.

Another of the party was Mountain Jim, who looked down upon six feet and six inches with a form as straight and strong as the barrel of his long rifle. Though the winters of twenty years in the mountains had plentifully sprinkled his hair with snow-flakes, the vigor of his earlier life was unimpaired.

Side by side with this veteran, and not a hair's breadth difference either in size or height, stood Prairie Paul.

"D'ye mean for Taos, old hoss?" cried Ray, as he turned from watching the plain and gazed at Rock.

"Every time, old beaver! We are bu'sted. The reds hav driv us from Hurricane and hyar we are. Our pack-animals and possibles are gone and we hav only our horses left. Let's for Taos, I say, and get a new outfit."

"And bring back a purty senorita for a squaw, wagh!" exclaimed Prairie Paul.

"That's the talk, old boy," chimed in Mountain Jim. "I'm tired of building my own fires and spitting the meat after a day's tramp. Ho for Taos and one o' her purty gals, I say!"

"On for Taos then!" shouted Reckless Ray, slouching his beaver over his head. "And I speak for the purtiest maid in the valley!"

"Look out then, old beaver!" cried Rock,

"for this coon don't play second to any possum. Hooray for Taos!"

No civilized relaxation was so much enjoyed by the mountain men in the days of which we speak as a trip to the Taos valley, and not a few of those journeys were undertaken for matrimonial intentions as well as pleasure.

Half an hour later our friends had gathered up their few things and were in the saddle ready for a start. Never was there a more gallant or hardier set of fellows than they, bent on that foray which "savored a heap" of sport, business and adventure.

Leaving the pass they struck the Yuta trail and rode through a country intersected with numerous streams and affording rich pastureage for their animals whenever they camped at night, or rested during midday, while herds of antelope and game of all kinds was found on every hand.

The tenth day of hard riding was drawing to a close and the settlement was still several miles distant.

"Wagh!" exclaimed Rock, "reckon we shall have to look up a stopping-place for the night. Leastways we can't overtake Taos afore moon-up."

"Right, old hoss," affirmed Reckless Ray. "Let's ride back inter the country a bit, and mayhap we shall find a proper roosting-spot."

Acting upon the suggestion, the little cavalcade diverged to the right, and after riding half a mile suddenly came upon a sort of plateau where the land fell abruptly down for many feet. Below they gazed upon a vast tract of prairie reaching eastward, while in the opposite direction lay a wooded district.

"Jeems Stopple!" exclaimed Rock, who was in advance, "we have got to turn heel for toe or we are up a stump!"

"You mean, old coon, that we shall be down a stump," corrected Ray, as he saw their situation.

"Down or up, I reckon it'd be all the same in a long run."

"Look thar, boyees!" cried Paul, excitedly, as he pointed to the south.

His companions started in surprise as they saw a dozen horsemen in plain sight, all rushing over the plain as if riding for dear life.

"Roaring buffaloes!" exclaimed Rock, "what is that a-scooting after them like all possessed with an onion in his teeth?"

By this time it was seen that the fleeing men, who were Mexicans as could be determined, were pursued by a single rider.

But such a rider!

As the participants in the strange race came nearer, the four friends saw that the solitary pursuer was a huge gray wolf crouching upon the back of a fleet-footed mustang!

CHAPTER II.

"HOORAY FOR FUN!"

"ROCKER MOUNTAINS!" ejaculated Rockless Ray, "that beats me!"

The horsemen were now directly below them and plainly seen, while their cries were rendering the air hideous. Their strange foe had not given any sign of hostility yet, but was still clinging to the mustang, that was rushing on at a mad rate, grim and dreadful.

"Boys," said Rock, as they saw the riders dash past, "let's take the side trail and cut 'em off."

Acting upon Rock's suggestion the hunters turned to the right, and after going a short distance they came to a spot where an easy descent was made to the plain below.

Dashing down the place at a break-neck speed they entered a patch of growth, to soon come out upon the other side, and in sight of the fleeing horsemen. But, to their surprise, the wolf-rider had disappeared.

"Hal! what is that?" asked Prairie Paul, pointing to a dark object lying on the ground a short distance off.

Quickly approaching the spot they found the body of one of the Mexicans—dead!

"Wal, that beats me holler as a burnt moocasin!" exclaimed Jim. "But see, the Greasers are coming back and mebbe they'll show the trail."

The frightened fugitives had indeed reined up, and at the sight of the four rangers started to ride toward them.

In answer to the mountaineers' inquiries the most self-possessed of the Mexicans told how they had been on a journey from Cristola Mission to Taos in company with their master's daughter, and had been pursued by the wolf-rider, that had killed three of their number.

"But the female—whar am she?" cried Rock.

All that the terrified peons could tell was that

she had become separated from them, and had been killed as likely as not by the dreadful rider.

"Boys," exclaimed Randal, "are we the possums to stand smoking when a woman is in peril?"

"Let's to her risky," answered Ray, and almost without another word they demanded of the Mexicans to be guided to the spot where they had last seen their mistress, when the little cavalcade were dashing swiftly over the plain, no one thinking to look further for the wolf-rider.

After ten minutes of smart riding the foremost of the Mexicans suddenly drew rein.

Wondering what was up the mountaineers followed their example to find that they had come upon another "fall-off" or break in the surface of the land.

This discovery, however, was not the cause of the exclamations that fell from their lips.

Below them, and riding leisurely along at the base of the bluff was a party of Indians, while in their midst, lashed upon the back of a pony by the side of the chief of the warriors, was a white woman.

A single glance showed that she was not only a captive but was enduring great agony from her captivity.

"It is Luella—our mistress," declared the peon leader to the white men.

"Let's scot back afore the reds see us," suggested Rock. "We must risky that purty one or Rock Randal loses his top-knot."

Cautiously retreating a few rods, the long, velvety grass of the plain muffling the hoof-strokes of their animals so that they made no noise, they paused to decide upon their course of action.

It was quickly decided to head the savages off at a point some fifty rods to the right and rescue the captive if possible by a spirited attack upon the red-skins who numbered less than a score.

Infusing as much courage as possible into the cowardly Mexicans, the mountaineers quickly prepared to carry their plans into effect.

Riding silently forward to the spot designated they drew up in a line.

"There they kom," exclaimed Rock, as they heard the savages approaching the plain in front of them, but below the descent. "Quick! it's going to be a risky ride, but we must venture it. Stick firm to your saddles and if ye clair the jump don't show the varmints nary mercy. Ready, Mexicers, and don't ye spoil the fun."

In an instant all appeared eager to carry out the bold design, which was to rush down the dangerous descent and put the savages to rout before they could rally to meet them.

As the hordes of red-men were nearly opposite, a single word of command left the lips of the intrepid Randal, when, as one, the four hunters plunged their rowels into their horses and dashed ferociously ahead down the sharp declivity.

Not so the treacherous Greasers. Caring more for their own safety than for the life of their mistress, they hesitated before risking that perilous ride. Even as they halted in trepidation, a wild cry was wrung from their lips.

"The Wolf Rider!"

With one accord they wheeled their animals and fled.

Sweeping upon their course with the speed of the wind followed the mysterious rider that had again abruptly appeared upon the scene.

Realizing the treachery and flight of their allies when it was too late to turn back from their headlong course, the mountaineers could only keep on.

With bounds of terror the horses plunged down the steep declivity and with wonderful sure-footedness gained the prairie below safely.

Retaining their seats with great difficulty the hunters, meanwhile making the air ring with their shouts, sent shot after shot into the midst of the amazed savages as the latter were sweeping past them.

"Hooray for fun!" yelled Rock, who led his little party, and his companions were not slow to follow his example.

Into the midst of the surprised savages they dashed, to scatter them right and left in terror. Again the rifles of the whites belched forth their deadly contents.

Wild the scene that followed.

Terrified at the unlooked-for and wild assault, some of the Indians fled in mad alarm. Others were too amazed to move.

It was only for a moment thus, however.

The chief saw the advantage they had in numbers and tried to rally his warriors to meet

the attack of the white men. But finding that impossible he, too, sought safety in flight, and holding firmly upon the captive made a furious dash for freedom.

"Hya!" yelled Rock, who plunged his own horse forward to intercept the savage.

For a minute it seemed that the red-skin would escape. Rock dared not fire for fear of hitting the girl, and his companion had all they could attend to. But Rock was not to be easily balked. Urging his horse swiftly forward he dashed in ahead and reined up right in front of the fleeing captor.

CHAPTER III.

FRIENDS OR FOES?

"Whoop—hooray, old powder-skin!" and as the cry rung from Randel he dodged a shot from the chief, to deal the latter a blow from his clubbed rifle, the next instant, with such force that he fell forward upon the pony's withers. Ere the savage could recover, Rock had lifted the captive upon the back of his own horse, and the Indian was buried to the plain by a sudden bound of his steed.

By this time, Rock's companions had completely routed the remaining red-skins, and the fight was over.

"How's your hands—all smooth?" he asked.
"Slick es a peeled hickory," replied Paul. "We ain't got so much as a scratch, and than am seven o' the smoky varmints who won't need enny camp-fire to-night. Is the gal peert?"

"I reckon. Ain't you, purty one?"

"Oh, yes; I thank you. But my name is Luella St. Dell."

"Jess as purty as you are," exclaimed the honest Rock, with deepest admiration. "Howsumever, I reckon ye'd like to git out of this uncomfortable posish."

The maiden, who could not have been more than eighteen, was indeed beautiful.

Dark hair, dark eyes that flashed with a spirit of bewitching power, a clear complexion and faultless form, it was little wonder the young hunter and his friends could scarcely conceal their admiration.

"But how kem ye in that 'tarnal coyote's power?" asked Reckless Ray, as soon as he could find his tongue enough to speak.

"I became separated from my cowardly escort, when I was surrounded and captured by the Indians," she replied. "I cannot thank you for your great kindness now, for, somehow, I can't get over my dreadful fright. I shudder to think what would have been my fate but for you. But how shall I reach my home even now? My horse is gone, and I cannot ask you to go way to Taos with me."

"Taos? That is jess where we are going, purty one—Miss Luella—and ye may toss my head-piece for a football if Rock Randel is going to leave ye on the sticks."

"Nary more are we, old hoss," chimed in his companions.

"D'yeh yaar that, Miss Lu? Ye are on a bang-up trail to hum. So help her to mount my hoss ahint me," continued our hero.

Murmuring her thanks for their kindness, though it may have been, but well-meant nevertheless, Luella was assisted to a seat behind Rock.

"Hold on fast," he said, "and we'll start for the trail at once."

The Mexicans were nowhere to be seen, and caring no more about them, the mountaineers headed for the route to their destination without further delay.

After riding in silence for some time, they came in sight of an old weather-beaten cabin that stood near a high cliff, and with not a sign of life apparent roundabout.

"Let's ride up that way," suggested Rock, "mebbe it'll be a good place for us to pass the night 'long as we can't fetch up to Taos with these tired hosses."

A minute later the little cavalcade reined up in front of the deserted structure.

"Nary a sign hyar," ventured Mountain Jim, as they surveyed the isolated building.

"Ain't pesky sartin' o' that," differed Prairie Paul, "'em looks to me a tarnal sight es ef the chap as pulled stakes hyar had left his moccasins ahind," and the old plainsman pointed to a pair lying on the ground near by.

Rock dismounted and picking them up said:

"Nary a chip difference, they hain't been worn since old St. Vrain got chipped for a biffler Sunday."

It was then quite dark, and as the "trail" must be still some way off, it was decided to spend the night at the lone hut.

Accordingly the animals were tethered in the growth near at hand, and the party repaired to the cabin.

Within, the building seemed even more deserted than from without.

There was a rude bench and a broken table which were all there was to be seen in the shape of furniture. In the old stone fire-place the charred remains of a couple of sticks of wood showed that a fire had been there not many days gone by. Perhaps some one who had been out on a hunt had stopped awhile there, as they proposed to do.

However, your mountaineer is not one to waste time in useless speculation, and once having made up their minds to stop there they began to make themselves as comfortable as possible.

A fire was soon roaring in the rude chimney-way, and sundry portions of the provisions they had stowed away in their possibles were prepared for eating.

After satisfying their appetites the friends saw that everything was in readiness for the night.

Seeing that the cabin was divided into two rooms it was decided that Luella should occupy one while they remained in the other, each taking his turn at watching, as it was not deemed safe to sleep without a guard.

Randell protested that they were doing too much for her, but Rock's word was law, and half an hour later, she had sought her apartment where the mountaineers had carried the blankets from their horses and thus prepared for her a comfortable couch.

Leaving her with their good wishes they returned to the other room, and too restless to lie down yet awhile, they went over in words the scenes of the past day.

"I tell you she is the prettiest gal I ever set these peepers on, and, I've seen sum, wag!" declared Rock, as their conversation turned on the maiden.

"Right, old hoss," seconded Ray; "and ef this beaver don't take her back to the mountains it'll be because he don't go."

Rock sprung to his feet.

"Dye mean that, old boy?" he cried.

"Wagh! I don't throw blind! But, what ails ye, old hoss?"

"What ails this hoss?" repeated Randell. "Ray, old coon, menny's the trail we've tramped together and it's like liftin' my own top-knot to hear ye say that, old pard. Speak, and say ye ain't in 'arnest, Ray."

"I am, old coon, in dead 'arnest. But, look hivar, old hoss, ye look pesky thin! Rocker Mountains, hay I spotted yer trail?"

"Ray," exclaimed Rock, solemnly, "hevn't I always been true to ye!"

"Every time, old boy."

"And hev made my meat yours and my blanket has covered us both?"

"True es fishing on a wet day," wondering what his companion was driving at.

"And menny's the time we hev felt like going under when we said it should be both or neither?"

"Korrect. But, hang me, old hoss, ef I can see the way your stick floats."

"Tis true as 'possum shinnin' a cottonwood by moonlight, every word, old coon," Rock went on, unheeding the interruption. "And ye hev stood by me every pull. Menny's the time ye hev saved my funeral, and I w'u'd give ye my top-knot ef tw'u'd keep yours. Now, we must give up all. Ray, ef ye stick to what ye hev said, but one o' us'll ever go back to the mountains!"

CHAPTER IV.

A BEWITCHED RIFLE.

RECKLESS RAY started up in alarm.

"Hey ye cl'an lost yer thinkers, old hoss?" he cried, seizing Rock's hand.

"Hey ye got 'em bad, old coon?" Randell went on.

"Got what?" exclaimed the other, in dismay.

"Don't ye see the trail, old coon? Hey ye got the spotted limboes a-cavortin' round your heart?"

In an instant the others were convulsed with laughter.

"Is that it, Rock?"

"Wal, I reckon."

"And you are tender on her, too?"

"I reckon," spoken tersely.

The laugh on Ray's lips died away.

"But we can be friends for all o' that."

"Dunno. I ain't the beaver to give up the bait, though I know I shall get trapped."

"No more am I. But we will be square. The best hoss wins, you know, old chap."

"Ray, I am an old mule-eared fool, with nary an eye for shooting. Es ye say, we can have a fair race, and the longest winded toad shall corral the game. Give us yer han', old coon, and we will leave it with the gal."

"Good, Rock; now you talk straight as a sycamore. Mayhap the gal won't look at us, arter all. The shemales are quar critters."

"I reckon. So, Ray, ye promise to stick to me jess the same o' I kaptivate that gal as ye hev alwus done afore?"

"My word for it, old hoss. But I'll bet my rifle 'g'in' yours 'ts me that traps her arter all."

"Greed," was Rock's quick reply, and thus for the time the matter was dropped.

Finally Ray volunteered to take the first turn as guard and the others laid down to sleep.

It could not have been far from midnight, and Mountain Jim had relieved Ray at his post, when the mountain men were startled from their sleep by the sharp report of a rifle.

Springing to their feet in amazement they looked excitedly about.

"'Twas Jim!" whispered Prairie Paul.

"I would have bet my top-knot 'twas in this—" Spang!

Rock did not finish his speech. There was no mistake now. The weapon had been discharged in the very room they were occupying!

There was no moon, but it was a clear starlight night and everything in the apartment was plainly seen. But not a living being was in view save themselves.

Rock's rifle was standing in the corner where he had placed it himself a short time before, and the sounds having come from that particular spot every eye was fixed upon the weapon in breathless waiting.

A minute passed and not a word had been spoken nor a move made, when a loud sh—ss—ss followed.

"Thar—"

S—spang! spang!

The mountaineers sprung back in terror. The two reports had succeeded each other so closely that they expected no less than a volley. But, as the sounds died away, silence again fell on the scene.

"What does it mean?" gasped Paul. "They kem from yer shooter, Rock, and no one has touched it!"

"I know it," replied Randell. "It beats me inter sasse—"

Phizz—bang!

"Jeems Stopple! we're a goner!"

Our mountaineers were brave men who had stood face to face with death in more ways than one and never flinched, but there was something so mysterious and supernatural in this that they actually trembled with fear. If there was a weak spot in their nature it was touched by superstition and this "savored a heap and two bits o' that," as Rock afterward expressed it.

Clutching their knives nervously they gazed upon the weapon spellbound.

In this way several minutes passed and they were beginning to breathe easier, thinking the crisis was over, when again the warning phizz was heard.

Bang! bang! bang! thundered the rifle, each report growing louder and louder, till the terrified listeners were forced to put their hands to their ears to shut out the awful clatter.

Their faces were now as colorless as the dead.

"It's no use!" muttered Rock, as he peered with half-closed eyes at his heavy gun which had been nearly thrown from the corner by the shock, but had fallen back into its old position. "Boyees, I hev carried that old shooter nigh onto three years and it never played sick a trick on me afore. I tell ye that must be spooks round hyar and they hev bewitched that weapon. We are a goner ef we don't git!"

"But ye wouldn't levant and leave the gal?" asked Ray.

"Hemlock splinters! we'd be meaner nor spruce gum to do that. But, boyees, we can't git to her without disturbing that gun."

"Jes-so. And she means to rouse the hull kentry. If that's a red-skin within ten miles he'll find us."

"I reckon. But, mebbe the old thing won't squirt any more! Dog-gone the old gudgeon! jes let me git my paws on her ag'in and I'll shake the witches out o' her. Hist! thar she goes ag'in!"

As Rock spoke the gun again belched forth in a prolonged report that fairly made the old building tremble.

"Jeems Stopple!" Rock groaned, "let me git out my prayers. That gun is worse nor a full grown tornader in a hail-storm!"

Dandy Rock's Rival.

"It's gone cl'ar out o' its senses!" declared Paul.

"It's bewitched true es p'izen in dog-days. I tell ye thar is a spook in thar big es old Sampson's foot in mud time. Don't tech it, Ray," he warned, as the other started toward the corner.

"But we must git it out from the way o' the door so we can git to the gal, and then we'll huff it like mad."

"Ye ar' a goner ef ye tech it. I—"

Sh-sh—ss! *spang!* sh-sh-phizz—*spang!*

Rockless Ray dodged back to the side of his companions completely convinced that he had better remain there.

Never were three men more puzzled or amazed.

During the few minutes succeeding that they stood inactive the rifle kept up an almost continual racket.

Sh-sh—ss! *spung!* *spang!* phizz! *spang!* *crash!* *bang!*

At last, when a brief respite had been given them, Rock said:

"Tain't nary use, boyees; we hev got to corral that weapon or our fun is blowed sky high to a red meetin'-house!"

CHAPTER V.

DEATH AND MYSTERY.

"How?" asked Reckless Ray, in evident surprise.

"You jess stand ready to ketch the Old Scratch ef he shows his head out o' the muzzle, and I'll hev that weapon so fur old Columbus won't deliver it I—"

Spang!

"I'll make ye spout out t'other end!" gritted Randel, as he cautiously approached the dreaded gun.

His companions, watching in silence, more than expected to see him hurled up through the building or sent in some mysterious way to the regions beyond mortal vision. And Rock, we doubt not he felt equally ill at ease, for as another report of the firearms rung out he dropped on his knees and began to crawl toward it, but not till another report had nearly stunned him did he succeed in grasping the noisy weapon by the stock, and with it extended at arm's length bounded for the open door.

Reaching the outside he threw the offending rifle as far out into the night as his strength would permit, the weapon all the while pealing forth its explosions.

"Thar," exclaimed Rock, triumphantly, as he rejoined his companions, panting for breath, "we are safe from t'at critter of he don't git into yer weapons. Blow me for a yaller-jacket on the peaked end o' a pin ef I warn't a leetle skinned! I hev seen a mad buffer, a rael livin' spook, a crasy Injun, a stung rattler, and all sich creatures, but I never see'd a bewitched gun afore. I ax what won't come next!"

"Hark! the old weapon don't gi'n up yet," said Prairie Paul.

"Wal, let her pepper all by herself. She's like some whim I've seen, determined to hev the last say. But let's git the gal and heel this place afore we are a goner."

Nothing loth, his companions assented, and the three started for the apartment where they had left the maiden.

Flinging open the door, Rock nearly fell over an obstacle in his course.

Bending over it, he saw that it was a human form.

"Tis Mountain Jim!" he cried, "and he is dead as a burnt cedar!"

A hurried examination revealed to them that their friend had been stricken down from a knife-blow, and the bloody instrument was still protruding from the ghastly wound.

Half fearing what followed they looked in vain for Luella.

"She's agoner!" cried Rock.

"But, how did she git away?" asked Ray as he stared wildly around. "Kem, we must find her."

A fruitless search was made, and they were fain to acknowledge themselves baffled.

"It's a blind trail!" declared Rock. "She has been tooted off on a broom handle or else some galoot has stole her away when we were havin' that pesky circus with my old shooter. Sunthin' is wrong or poor Jim wouldn't lay there so."

"Co-rect, pard; but what is that?" and he pointed to a slip of paper lying on the floor. "Mebbe it will speak a hearn. These gals are queer critters. Hal here is sign!" and as he picked up the paper, they saw that there was writing on it.

"Take it out to the fire, and mayhap we can find how the stick floats."

"Tis the work o' her purty fingers, but, Heaven bless her, little good it'll do this niggur. I can read Ingine sign every time slick and the reds can't git round me *thar*. I am sum for beaver, too, but this sticks me slick! Hyar, Rock, mebbe ye can foller the trail."

Rock took the missive and after considerable difficulty made it out as follows:

"Gone to Taos."

"LUELLA."

"Hemlock with cedar leaves!" he said as he finished, "what do you think o' that?"

"May I be kivered with the coal-dust o' the Old Boy's ef I know. I am throwed!"

"Let's earth poor Jim, and then git," suggested Paul. "It is sartin to me she ain't round ya, and the quicker we git away from this outlandish land the better it'll be for our futer to say nothin' o' the present."

"Greed. It am plain es a peck o' onions that the gal ain't to be found. So let's dig Jim's funeral."

Selecting a spot not far from the old cabin, they began to dig a grave for the body of their unfortunate companion.

When at last their task was ended they bore the lifeless form to the pit, and soon it was hid from mortal view forever.

Used to suffering and scenes of death as they were, the hardy trio still retained some of the more tender feelings of bygone years, for, as they turned to seek their horses they brushed teardrops from their eyelashes.

"Jim was a good boy and he and I have had many a long tramp together," said Prairie Paul, as he took a last look at the sacred spot.

"True es preaching from a pine stump on a hot Sunday," affirmed Rock. "But mayhap we shall feel like j'ining him on the long trail with nary a one to dig our funeral ef we don't git afore sun-up."

The firing from Randel's rifle had ceased, but he gave it no thought, and took with him in its place the one belonging to Mountain Jim.

Thus it was only a few minutes later that they were riding away from the lonely hut. But, as they were losing sight of it, Rock looked back to give a cry of surprise.

"Look, boys!" he exclaimed, "ef thar ain't Jim a-standing in the doorway may I be shot into splinters!"

Turning back in wonder they saw some one watching them from the cabin. Without hesitation they wheeled their animals and dashed back to the place; but before they could get near enough to distinguish the man he disappeared, and though they searched in every direction they could find no trace of him.

"It must hev been Jim's spook!" affirmed Rock.

"But it wasn't tall enough for him," said Ray. "Let's git for Taos, and the gal."

"Taos 'tis then, and may Old Nick git me ef I ain't glad to leave this shanty."

Without further delay they headed for the "city" and "no grass grew under the feet o' nary hoss in that tall cauvt."

CHAPTER VI.

THE BELLE OF THE FANDANGO.

The sun was a hand's span above the eastern horizon as our mountaineers dashed into the village of Fernandez, more commonly but improperly called Taos.

As they swept along the main street with that independent mien born to them of their mountain life the dark-eyed, *rebozo*-wrapped muchachas watched them from the entrances to the low adobe houses, and ever and anon cigarrito was removed from the feminine mouth, to give expression to the salutation:

"Welcome, Americans."

Returning the greeting by raising their slouched beavers, the hunters kept on through the place.

Their destination was the home of a brother trapper who had previously married one of the fair señoritas of the "city," and settled down to a quiet life.

Soon reining up in front of his humble abode, they were met by a glad greeting.

Five minutes later they had cared for their horses and were "at home" with their host.

"You are just in season," he declared, as they satisfied their hunger from his well-filled larder, "for there is to be a fandango this very night. And when 'tis known that you have come extra preparations will be made. It will be the great event of the season."

"Hooray for the fandango and all the purty gals o' Taos!" cried Rock, tossing up the huge

bone he had been picking the meat from and catching it on the point of his knife as it came down. "But I say, Gil, old coon, can ye tell me who sich an angel as Luella St. Dell is?"

"That must be old St. Cassa's niece. They ain't been in the place long. Her father is dead, I believe."

"Whar is her home?"

"St. Cassa lives jess out the city in that big house to the left as you pass the Square. By the way, the fandango is to be there to-night. The old chap's nephew who has been gone away some time has got home and the dance is in honor of him."

Without heeding the last words of his friend Rock threw aside the remnants of the breakfast and began to "cavort round like a wild buffler."

"Hooray!" he cried, "we shall see the purty Luella."

Gil watched his antics in silence until at last in explanation Rock told of what had happened at the deserted cabin.

"Not so much deserted as you suppose," replied the other, "for Old Solitary, the hermit, stops there. Then you saw the Wolf Rider of which so much has been told?"

"Every time, old hoss. But ye say a chap lives at that old shebang. That can't be possible. We see'd the hull place and he couldn't be stowed away there."

"He spends most of his time hunting, I am told, so he was probably off."

"Jes-so. Reckon I shu'd want to be off all the time if I had got to live thar. But didn't that old gun o' mine jes tear around though? It would have made yer h'ar bile on end to hev seen it."

The old mountaineer shook his head when asked for his opinion concerning the mystery.

The day passed all too slowly for our impatient heroes, and among the very first at the fandango were their conspicuous forms.

Soon a goodly number were present.

The dusky beauties of Taos had spared no pains to make themselves worthy of notice, for sooner was it known that three Americans just from the mountains were to be there than they had greater reason to appear at their best.

No worthless *Pelado** for them, when an American is on hand, and a mountaineer man, too. So off came the coats of dirt and *alegría* which had covered their faces since the last dance, and their skin shone fair and pure. Their long, black hair was braided into a long queue and allowed to hang down their backs, while it was plastered smoothly back from their brows. Habited in garbs of gaudy color and fastened at the waist with ornamented belts, while gold and silver adorned their ears and necks, they were, indeed, more than passably charming.

Still Rock and Ray were poorly satisfied. Luella had not yet appeared. Would she fail to be present?

Again and again they asked themselves the question, and were as far as ever from an answer.

Finally the musicians seated at one end of the large room began their work, and as the notes of the *heaca*—a species of the guitar—and an Indian drum, called *tome*, with a *bandolina*, fell upon the scene, a dozen dancers took the floor and the fandango was opened.

Our friends were among the midst, each with a merry damsel upon his arm, when they saw the door open and a couple of new-comers appeared.

One was Luella, and her companion was a tall, swallow-faced Mexican.

They quickly mingled in the dance, and soon Rock and Ray were brought *vis-a-vis* to the fair maid, when she gave a slight scream of surprise.

"Don't be afeared, purty one," whispered Rock; "we are your friends."

The Greaser turned a withering look of hatred upon the audacious Americans, as his partner seemed so affected at meeting them, and muttered something that sounded like an oath under his breath.

At the first opportunity Rock sought her side and asked for her company in the next figure, a request which she readily granted, making him exceedingly happy thereby.

When at last he led her from the fatigue of the dance for a minute's rest, he asked for an explanation of her disappearance the night before at the old cabin.

"Oh, senor, don't ask me," she implored, "for I cannot tell you all you would know, so please

* Meaning one of the idlers hanging round the town, and called "Greaser" by the Americans.

let it pass. I did not mean to wrong you. And here comes my cousin, San Mullre, and I must leave you."

The next moment she was in the maze of the whirling dancers with the swarthy-faced Mexican, and Rock was alone suffering an agony he had never felt before. Ay, that evening was one of exquisite happiness and extreme misery, the one following the other so closely that they seemed allied.

We must not forget Ray who was equal with Rock in that particular.

Together they occupied much of the fair Luella's time to the evident displeasure of San Mullre. His evil visage grew fierce in its expression, and the nervous clenching of his hand told that a storm was brewing.

Seeming indifferent to all that, our mountaineers still pursued their course until at last Luella said to Rock:

"You must not ask me to dance with you again, for I have already angered my uncle and cousin. So please get some one else."

"Who cares for 'em? I'm a mountain man and there ain't Greasers enough in Taos to skeer me off, so giv' us yer paw for another hop, my pretty Luella."

"No-no! I can't!"

"Jes this once," and his arm encircled her waist.

At that moment the Pelado, San Mullre, sprung forward and attempted to tear her from his grasp.

"Quit that, you Spaniard!" yelled Rock, and with a well-directed blow he felled the other to the floor. "You can't shine in a crowd like this!"

The next instant a hoarse cry rung through the room and a dozen or more of the Greasers hurled themselves upon the intrepid mountaineer.

Placing Luella behind him so that she should not be harmed, Rock faced the infuriated mob defiantly, answering yell for yell and blow for blow.

The fandango had turned to a fight.

CHAPTER VIII.

"FIRE! FIRE!"

As they saw the peril of their companion, Reckless Ray and Prairie Paul were not long idle.

Their rifles were in the corner, and with a single bound they reached the weapons, when, with them in their hands, they mowed down the shrieking Mexicans with stunning blows, clearing a path to the side of Rock.

The latter had drawn his pistols and was standing his ground with reckless determination.

"Hooray for the free coons of the mountains! Don't giv' the varmints nary show for top-lights!"

The room-full of half-drunken Greasers, blockaded in by the terrified women, made a mad fight.

San Mullre was speedily on his feet and led the infuriated throng.

Rifle-shots, the ring of steel, yells of assailants, cries of the females and groans of the fallen Mexicans made a fearful Babel of sounds.

As Rock emptied his firearms, he snatched his long knife from its sheath, and still unscratched by the battle sent death into the midst of his foes.

Ray and Paul were doing equally as good work, and as they swept their trusty weapons around their heads upon the mob surrounding them, it seemed for a time that the defeat of the Peladoes was certain.

Soon, however, a shot from the horde, better directed than the rest, struck Paul, and with an exclamation of pain he reeled and fell.

"Paul's rubbed out!" cried Reckless Ray, in a voice that rung high above the confusion of the conflict, and, maddened by the fall of his friend, he dealt his blows with such power that he shivered the breech of his rifle; then, unarmed, he fought the Greasers hand-to-hand.

Rock heard the startling affirmation and turned to see Paul's lifeless form lying on the floor. But he had all he could do to keep his wild assailants off. Surrounded by a circle of fallen Peladoes, others took their places, and he knew that soon he must succumb.

At this critical moment, when everything seemed lost, he caught sight of a huge table in the corner of the room which was supported by legs of enormous size.

Quick as thought he resolved upon a new course.

"This way, Ray, for your life!" he cried, and he dashed through the Mexicans to the spot.

Though bleeding from at least half a dozen

flesh wounds, Reckless Ray followed, and divining at once Rock's intentions he wrenched one of the bearings from the table with his powerful hands and again he was armed.

Rock was as successful, and as the cowardly Greasers beheld the ponderous weapons in the Herculean power of the mountaineers descending upon their heads with deadly force, they retreated in dismay.

"Fling it to 'em for poor Paul's sake!" shouted Ray.

But Rock had turned to look for Luella who had been separated from him in the fight, without finding her.

In fact, by this time the women had nearly all left the building, and the men were fast disappearing.

It seemed that the contest was almost over, but a cry more appalling quickly told the meaning of the sudden change in the scene.

"Fire! Fire!" rung above the din of the strife.

As the alarm was uttered the flames broke through the wall of the building with forked, hissing tongues.

Whether the conflagration was the work of an incendiary, or caught from accident was never known. Little did it matter either, for it was all the same to the two friends who must soon perish if they did not leave the doomed structure.

With a yell of defiance Rock sprang toward the door and would have gained it had not an appeal for help from Ray caused him to pause.

Turning he saw his friend reel forward and throwing up his hands fall heavily by the side of Prairie Paul.

Rock would never desert a pard and forgetting the death that he seemed to be courting, he hastened to Ray's side.

"Are ye goin' under sure?" he asked, anxiously.

"I reckon the varmints hev wrung a cold deal on me. I am hit under the shoulder."

"Stiff up your lip, old coon, and I'll fix ye in a jiffy."

"No-no, Rock! Git while ye can. Ye can't help me for I am bound on my long trail."

Randel had torn his friend's hunting-shirt aside and found that though the shot was deep and painful there was a chance that it might not prove fatal and he instantly began to stay the flow of blood.

"See, the building will fall soon. I say, old boy 'eave me with Paul hyar and save your hair while ye can."

"Not of I know it. Does Rock Randel play possum? He'll save ye, Ray, or go under with ye. D'y'e hyar that, old beaver?"

"Ye are a true one, old hoss, but I ax ye to git while ye can."

Rock was determined to stand by till the last, and as he hastily bandaged the wound he looked around for an avenue of escape.

Outside the yelling Greasers had encircled the burning building, and dancing about in mad glee were only waiting for the mountaineers to rush out when they would dispatch them.

The fire was increasing fast and its heat was becoming so intense that to remain there long would be death of a most fearful kind.

Rock's quick eye took this all in at a glance, and he said to his companion:

"Can't ye stand up, my boy, and make one show more?"

With difficulty Ray regained his feet.

"Here, old hoss, take that knife, and hold fast to me while I lead the way to freedom or our funeral. Hyar the pesky varmints yell, and we have got to go under like dogs with nary show. But kem on, and more than one coyote shall bite the dust afore Rock Randel goes under."

Lending his support to his wounded companion the intrepid mountaineer started toward the door.

CHAPTER VIII.

AN INTERRUPTED WEDDING.

At that instant renewed yells came from the horde surrounding the building, and Rock uttered a cry of astonishment as he looked out to behold the Wolf Rider riding in among the Mexicans with the velocity of the whirlwind.

Quick as a flash the terrified Greasers fled in every direction, their cries of triumph turning to shrieks of fear.

"Hyar, Ray, old boss, thar's a side-show for us!" and in his excitement Rock dragged his friend forward to the door.

As he did so, however, a volley of bullets flew around his head, telling that their foes had not all fled yet.

Then a light form left the throng of half-crazed Peladoes, and bounded with the swift-

ness of the antelope toward the burning dwelling, and to the surprise and joy of the mountaineers, Luella stood beside them.

"Quick! follow me," she panted, "and I will save you," and crossing the floor she pointed to a large ring which the American's had failed to notice.

"Open that trap-door and I will show you a secret passage by which you can escape without any trouble; they would kill you if you dared come in sight."

Silently obeying her direction Rock was soon gazing into the darkness of an underground way.

Seizing a brand from the fire Luella quickly led the way down into the dismal passage, while Rock and Ray gladly followed.

It would appear that the house had been a sort of refuge-place in time of war, and that this passage had been built to enable the occupants to escape in case of great danger.

When they were at the bottom of the cellar the brave girl told Rock to remove one of the stones from what seemed the solid wall, and once the other had done that their course was clear, though they were forced to crawl for considerable distance along the damp, subterranean pass.

At last a faint line of starlight was visible, and a little later they stood in the open air outside of the mass of Greasers still watching the building that was now nearly consumed by the fire.

"You can escape now," said Luella, as she started to leave them. "But if you value your lives get out of Taos as soon as possible."

"Must ye leave us, purty one?" asked Rock in confusion. "Ye hev saved our top-knots and ye can count on us as your friends every time. Jess?"

"Gol I must not be seen with you," and she spoke excitedly.

"Why, Lord bless ye, my sweet one, we wouldn't hurt a hair o' your head. Rock—"

"Go—go, and do not seek for me!" and even as the words lingered on her lips she disappeared.

"Jeems Stoppole! that is blinder'n a blind buffer in a snow-storm!" exclaimed Randel, as he stood like one transfixed, gazing at the space she had occupied the moment before. "But we can't foller her now."

"No, Rock. Let's git for Gil's."

"'Greed,'" and a little later the mountaineers reached the home of their friend in safety. He had not gone to the fandango, but, hearing of the fight, had feared his companions were killed, and thus hailed their reappearance with unfeigned joy.

Ray's wounds were dressed and the remainder of the night passed without adventure.

The following day Reckless Ray was weak and sore, so that he was unable to go out; and Gil, by dint of great persuasion, succeeded in keeping Rock within the house.

"I tell ye tain't any use to show yer head. The Greasers think ye hev gone under and twen't hurt ye any for 'em to 'tine in that predicament—leastways till Ray gets on his paws again."

"But my blood biles to pizen heat when I think o' poor Paul. I'll hev an evener for that job."

"And Ray and I'll chip in with the fun, when he can shoulder a gun."

Thus Rock was persuaded to remain inactive a full day. But when night came on he could wait no longer, and declared he must take a stretch."

Accordingly equipped with his host's rifle and small-arms, he sallied forth.

Though it was a clear, starlight night, Rock saw but a few persons on the streets, and he kept on his way, apparently unnoticed.

He had no decided motive in his course, but had yielded to his uneasiness in seeking the open air.

"It's ag'in' human nature to be shut up so," he muttered to himself. "Frogs must hav water to paddle in or they ain't goin' to shine, and this coon is goin' to hev a sniff o' the atmosphere or he'll pine away like a mulle'n stalk in a mud-puddle. Nature can't go on alwaz cooped up like a yaller chicken in a hoop snake."

While cogitating thus, Rock passed from the main street to a cross-way where he thought to escape all passers-by; but his surprise was great when he found that instead of avoiding the night vagrants he was finding them more plenty.

"Thar's fun up hyar sumwhar, or my sensors are all stubbed up," and he quickly joined the brawling throng to move rapidly toward the outskirts of the place.

Rock had not gone far when he saw the crowd pausing in front of one of the largest dwellings on the street.

He was just drawing up in the shadow of the adjacent buildings, where he could watch the scene without being observed, when his blood was sent tingling through his veins by a sharp, piercing cry.

"Spare me! Oh, uncle, spare me!"

It was a woman's voice, and Rock instantly recognized it as Luella's.

She was in danger! He needed nothing more to stimulate him to action.

Her appeal had come from the house in front, and the next instant the throng around were amazed to see him bound through their midst, and with a wild whoop burst in the door of the building and disappear within.

Rifle in hand Rock Randel sprung into the adjoining apartment among a dozen or more of men and women, who uttered shrill yells of terror at his sudden appearance.

As his sharp eyes swept the scene before him he saw at a glance the situation.

Foremost in the group was San Mullre, half-supporting the form of Luella, who at the sight of Rock tried to break from the Mexican's grasp.

A padre was near them and our mountaineer knew that he had broken in upon a marriage ceremony.

CHAPTER IX.

ROCK'S DEFIANCE.

"SAVE me!" implored Luella, the first to speak as Rock met her gaze.

With rapid strides Randel reached her, and before the Greaser could defend himself he was hurled to the floor, and the maiden was supported by the strong arm of the mountaineer.

"Jess keep that!" cried Rock as he felled the Peiada. "Reckon ye won't savor much o' sick dinin' if ye ain't more keeful how ye cavort round. Wot tarnation mischief was they up to, Miss Lu?"

"Oh, sir! they would make me wed that man, San Mullre, and I hate him! He—"

"Hate him, do you?" cried a tall, callous Mexican springing forward to her side, and seeming upon the point of tearing her from the protection of Randel. "I'll show you what you will gain by defying me! Take that!"

But, when the upraised arm of the Mexican descended he lay sprawling upon the floor.

"Jes-sol take that!" exclaimed Rock, grimly, as he turned to the crowd to see if others were going to take part in the affray. But no more moved, and as Mullre regained his feet Rock was forced to face him.

"What do you mean, dog of an American?" growled the villain.

"Jess try me and see," was the cool reply. "Cospita! you shall pay dearly for this, dog! San Mullre knows you too well. But you should have been dead! and how is it that you are here now?"

"Don't be too quisitive, old yaller-skin. I don't like to tell my private business to such a long-eared coyote as ye make out to be."

"Caramba! you forget where you are. That tongue may sign your death-warrant! Release that girl, dog!"

"Do you mean for me to let her go?" asked Randel, with provoking coolness.

"That I do, cur of an American."

"Sho! Ye are a purty pup—that is a fact, old ginger-eyes, but ye are mighty sassy. Tears to me yer mam must hev left ye an orphine quite young, or ye w'u'd be more perlite when wimmen-folks are round. Won't ye ax me that question ag'in, and be a leetle purtier 'bout it round the mouth?"

Had the Mexican been less excited he would have seen that Rock was purposely dallying with him, and that his talk was serving a double object, so that while it amused the intrepid mountaineer to witness the other's anger, he slowly retreated toward a corner of the room that his foes might all be in front of him. Luella he still kept by his side.

Fuming like a madman, Mullre cried:

"Fool unhand that girl, or I will shoot you!" and he half raised a pistol, when the thrilling tones of Rock caused him to hesitate.

"Move hand and I will rend your carcass with lead!" As he spoke his rifle came on a level with the other's breast.

The spectators uttered cries of amazement, for as yet none had offered to move. By this time the entry-way was full of anxious, excited Mexicans.

San Mullre gave expression to a horrible oath, and his sallow face looked more hideous than ever.

"Luella," he growled, "come away from that cur."

Seeing that she did not heed Mullre's command, St. Cassa, her uncle, exclaimed, fiercely:

"What do you mean, Luella? Come away from that man and we will have the ceremony over at once. Sir," addressing Rock, "you will do well to leave while you have the opportunity."

"Jeems Stopple! how purty yer eyes twinkles when yer soft soap me so honest like! Sho! shu'dn't wonder ef I war humsick ef ye driv me off. "But I ain't going till the gal axes me to."

"Oh, kind sir, I do not want you to get into trouble on my account. Uncle would force me to marry Senor Mullre and I would die first. But you had better go, for you cannot help me."

"Jess ye wait and see. Ef one mountain man ain't good for a room-full o' pesky Greasers may I be tied into a hard knot and hove cl'ar to the sea o' California in a bald-headed man's hat! They kem hyar to help ye o'er o'er troubles, and by the Rocker Mountains, I'll do it, or git laid 'neath six feet o' funeral."

During the time Rock's gaze had not left the Mexican who had been vainly hoping that he would, if only for a moment, relax his vigilance that he might regain his lost advantage.

Old St. Cassa was equal to the situation however; and as he saw that only desperate measures would avail against the daring mountaineer he turned to the Peladoes, saying:

"Seize the impudent hound, and throw him into the street. I will not submit to such insulting treatment in my own house."

The peons, to a man, prepared to capture the hunter, and were about to spring toward him, when a warning cry from the padre, who had been heretofore a silent spectator, caused them to pause.

Rock, as if unable to stand more, glanced along his rifle-barrel and seemed on the eve of firing.

San Mullre stood speechless with terror.

"Keep 'em coyotes off or I'll dig your funeral, San Mullre!" gritted Randel.

St. Cassa saw his nephew's peril and waved the mob back, when a sullen uproar filled the room.

"Hyar I am; why don't ye kem and git me?" demanded Rock, tauntingly as he continued to watch his man.

The old Mexican gnashed his teeth in rage.

"Cospita! you shall die!" and he would have hurled himself upon the audacious mountaineer had not Mullre cried for him to stop.

"Let the American dog go if he will. We have no business with him," he then muttered.

"The American dog don't go till he knows the gal is safe," answered Rock. "Swear that she shall be left in peace and I will go, but not till then."

"We do not intend to harm the girl," replied Cassa. "She is my niece and this was a wedding you interrupted. Rock Randel, go your way quietly, or this shall be a dear night's job for you."

"Nough sa'd," declared Rock. "Luella, have you friends you would go to, or do you want to stay here?"

"I cannot stay here! I must go, anywhere to get away from here. I have friends who would pity and care for me."

"Then you shall go to them, or every Greaser in Taos shall ride in funerals!"

CHAPTER X.

CAUGHT!

Rock's bold declaration was received with shouts of rage.

His first thought was to put a bullet through the brain of the dastardly San Mullre, and then trust to his fortune to escape. But as he remembered the low window just to his right, he whispered to Luella:

"Escape by the window as quick as possible, and I will follow in a jiffy."

Without hesitation the maiden started to obey, and as she did so, Randel's clear tones again silenced the mob around:

"I will shoot San Mullre the minnit one o' ye move!" and the ominous words fairly awed the spectators into inactivity.

The victim uttered a fierce oath as he saw Luella reach the window-sill.

Must he stand idly by and see her escape? The thought maddened him. Forgetting his situa' inn, or perhaps thinking to dodge Rock's shot he leaped madly forward.

The spang of Randel's rifle rung out, and with a groan the doomed Mexican fell.

St. Cassa gave a furious yell and hurled himself upon the mountaineer, crying:

"Cut him down! Kill him! He has killed San and he must die!"

Then the excited throng, armed with knives and pistols, dashed forward, expecting to annihilate their foe in an instant.

But Rock sprung far enough from the corner to swing his rifle about his head and with a sweep of the weapon mowed down a circle of the shrieking Peladoes as if they had been blades of grass.

Among those who fell was old St. Cassa. Seeing him fall, the padre instantly led the others.

The spectators rushed in from the hall and outdoors till the room was packed.

By this time Luella had escaped through the window, and seeing that he must soon be overcome if he did not get out of the room, Rock uttered one of his mountain war-whoops, to crouch back into the corner an instant as he gathered his strength, when the amazed Greasers saw him bound into the air over their heads like a football, passing through the window into the open air.

Rock had dropped his rifle before he leaped out of the house, and as he struck the ground without, his first move was to draw his revolvers.

Quite a crowd was about him, but his appearance had been so sudden that before they could recover from their surprise enough to attack him, he seized Luella by the hand and darted away from the spot.

An instant later the padre bounded out of the building, and urged the crowd upon the course of the fugitives.

As Rock heard the mob close behind them, he hurried Luella more swiftly on, but knowing that they could not long keep clear of the yelling horde.

He did not wish to lead the Greasers in the vicinity of Gil's home, for his friend's sake, so that he followed the first by-way, and soon disappeared in the darkness from the sight of his pursuers, who shouted louder than ever as they fancied he would escape.

"Keep up courage, miss, and we'll give 'em the slip," said Rock, encouragingly, as they ran along the dark way.

The next minute, however, he heard a party in front rapidly approaching, and a meeting seemed inevitable.

Seeing a deserted house to the right, Rock raised Luella in his strong arms as if she had been a child, and sprung toward the building, gaining its cover before his foes had discovered him.

"We'll keep shady, and mayhap the varmints won't smell us out," he said, as they could hear them in the street opposite.

Led now by St. Cassa, who had recovered from the blow dealt by Rock, the infuriated Mexicans rushed pell-mell along the street.

"They can't have gone this way far, for we have come up from below and would have seen them," Randel heard one say.

"Then they are in one of these buildings," cried Cassa. "Cospita! I'll bet they are in the old hid here."

"Randel Rock! they mean us," exclaimed the mountaineer. Then he said hurriedly: "Luella, they'll surround this ranch quicker, and then we are a goner. You know whar Gil Rey lives and 'tis only a few steps across to thar from the back side o' this building. Now, git for your life and I'll keep the coyotes in front."

"But you will be killed!"

"Not ef I'm alone. I'll show ye some tall fun. So git, and I guess ye will fetch up thar all right."

Luella saw that it was useless to oppose her preserver, and then, too, she realized that if she should escape she could warn his friends of his danger.

Thus she quickly decided to go.

"You will be careful, Rock!"

"For your sake, purty one. But, go while ye can and remember Rock Randel will do his level best for ye."

An instant later she disappeared out into the yard to the rear of the dwelling, and Rock as suddenly appeared before his foes in the front doorway.

"Hooray! hyar I am. Kem and get me!"

A wild yell came from the horde as they caught sight of him.

"Quick, men!" cried old Cassa; "here he is! We must take him, dead or alive. But spare her."

Then the Mexicans rapidly gathered in front

of the house, and rushed forward to capture the defiant Rock Randel in his retreat.

A few shots were fired, but only a few of the Peladoes were armed with rifles, and they showed themselves poor marksmen.

Cool as if he were meeting a flock of mountain sheep rather than two-score of infuriated men led by a veritable human fiend, Rock awaited the onset of his foes.

The whip-like reports of his revolvers rang out and the foremost of the assailants bit the dust.

Some of the others hesitated, but St. Cassa managed to keep the majority at his heels, and gaining courage by the excitement they joined in the attack like a pack of wild beasts, ferocious and reckless, but with little of caution or judgment.

Rock was satisfied to see that all had congregated in front, and if he could keep them there till Luella could escape he hardly cared for what might follow.

Emptying chamber after chamber of his revolvers with deadly aim, Rock then, as his shots failed to check the onslaught of the Mexicans, sprung back to close the old door against them, when the half-decayed floor suddenly gave away beneath him, and he was thrown from his feet.

He attempted to spring up, but found himself caught between the boards, and before he could wrench himself free, his foes rushed into the building.

CHAPTER XI.

A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE.

"SEIZE him!" roared St. Cassa, as he saw Rock struggling upon the floor.

With exultant yell his followers fell upon the entrapped mountaineer.

Finding that inevitable capture stared him in the face, Rock dropped down through the aperture rent in the floor and disappeared quick as a flash.

Uttering howls of rage the Greasers stood over the spot.

"Surround the building," thundered Cassa. "The dog can't escape and we'll have him yet."

The house was encircled by a ring of the gesticulating mob almost as quickly as the order was given, and then those within the structure tried to devise a plan to rout and capture their foe.

Search, too, was made for Luella, and the baffled uncle was sorely perplexed to know what had become of her.

"We will capture the American hound, and we shall find her then," he declared.

There was not over three feet of space between the floor and the ground where Rock had gone, and to drive him from his covert was no easy job as they well knew. No one dared to enter the place for they had tested too well his manner of self-defense, and cared not to lose their lives.

Some one proposed to burn the building and thus drive him from his retreat, but old Cassa who had seen this mode of warfare prove a failure once quickly scouted the idea, and commanded that the structure be torn to the earth.

As it was a small dwelling this seemed no great undertaking for so many hands, and they began work at once with a hearty will.

With the spot surrounded so that the mountaineer could not escape if he tried, the house inside of an hour had been all removed to the floor.

"Now for the tug-of-war!" hissed the leader. "As we take up the floor keep your eyes open, and the moment he is seen shoot him like a dog."

The work went on more slowly now and with bated breath the armed guard watched for the appearance of their foe.

Still piece after piece was torn away of the floor and yet he was not seen. At last every part had been removed and the spectators gazed upon each other with a feeling akin to awe.

Rock Randel was not to be found!

What did it mean!

St. Cassa raved most bitterly, and even the padre, we are sorry to say, indulged in expressions that hardly fitted his pious calling.

They were as puzzled over the disappearance of Luella as that of Rock.

Some doubted that they had been in the building at all. But there were those who knew they had seen the latter, and were equally as certain that he had gone under the floor though no one could understand how and where he had escaped. Escaped? that was impossible!

Finally, however, they turned away from the place completely baffled.

"If they are in Taos it will be likely that they will go to that American's, Gil Rey, and we will find them there."

Without further delay they rushed *en masse* toward the old mountaineer's home.

Meanwhile Luella had safely reached there, and as she told her story the old man moved uneasily.

"Rock 'll outwit 'em ef any one can, but I fear it'll go hard with him. Ray, ye jess look arter things hyar and I'll go out and see ef I can find the way the stick floats."

But his "better half" interposed.

"If the enemy failed to capture Rock they would almost certainly attack them there."

"I vum, old gal!" exclaimed Gil, after a minute's consideration, "ef ye don't know 'nough to be a beaver! I'll jes jine with ye. Howsumever, I'll scout out and do a leetle looking round. Don't git anxious fer I'll kem back afore the critters kem round."

Thus with a few words of caution he went out to see what he could find.

Half an hour later he returned with an anxious look upon his sun-bronzed countenance.

"Rock has gi'n 'em the slip somehow or ruther, and the tormented oven-peakers are kemin' fer us hyur like hot taters!"

"Then we must prepare to meet them," said Rockless Ray, coolly. "I feel that my wound won't hinder me from doin' a heap."

"Look a hyur," replied Gil, "it 'tain't best for the Greasers to know you or the gal are hyur, so you keep shady and I'll fix 'em. Ha! thar they kem!"

A little later there came a terrific pounding at the door, and in answer to the imperative summons, Gil Rey demanded:

"What's up, old hoses, that ye'd tear the ruf flop onto my brain-piece?"

"We want Rock Randel and my niece, Luella," replied Cassa quickly.

"Sho! Wal, I swoow, I shu'd never hev sposited. Didn't think they war hyar, did ye?"

"They are here, Senor Reynolds," affirmed the other, boldly.

"Sho! Pears to me ye are barking up cottonwood. Rock Randel ain't hyar! And es to the gal mebbe he can tell. So go 'bout your biz and let peaceful folks snooze."

St. Cassa seemed puzzled, but he quickly replied:

"I wish to search your house. You will not object to that?"

"Jeehoosophat! Sha'n't I though? Jess try and see. I tell you Rock Randel is not hyar, and neither do I know where he am."

"You lie!" came the fierce retort. "Open the door and let us come in."

"Never! The first man who dares to enter here dies like a wolf!"

"We will tear the building down over your head, but we will have Rock Randel dead or alive! So let him come out and we will not harm you, Senor Reynolds."

"Rock Randel is dead for all I know. As to searching my house, ye won't do it till you walk over my dead body!"

A sullen cry rising almost to a roar followed the brave hunter's words.

"Surround the building, men," said St. Cassa. "We will drive the dog from his retreat and capture him if we have to ransack every house in Taos."

"They mean to attack us!" announced Ray, as he watched the mob through the window.

"I reckon. But that old doo'll stand quite a siege I kalkilate. Thar they kem. Don't waste any powder, but pepper the varmints to your bestest."

Yelling like demons the mob rushed toward the door, and with axes, clubs, and whatever they could get, began to try and break it from its hinges.

Those within opened fire upon them, but so great were the numbers of their foes that their shots hardly made an impression on their ranks.

"They are going to burst through in spite o' us!" gritted Gil. "D'y'e keep the post hyar, and I'll git the females stowed away so the niggers can't find 'em, when, mebbe we can 'scape 'em."

Without comprehending fully his companion's meaning, Ray continued to fire upon the enemy, while Gil Rey told the frightened women to follow him.

"Thet hiding-place I fixed up will kem in handy, Dolores," he said to his wife as they entered the next apartment.

Between the partitions of the rooms was a considerable space, and the mountaineer had so arranged the boarding that by removing some wooden pins he could take away a part and

then replace it without showing any indication that it had ever been disturbed.

"Quick!" he said. "You must remain there perfectly quiet until sum one o' us kem to git ye, or ye are sure the varmints have all gone, and ye think Ray and me hev got floored. Keep up courage and ye'll kem out slick."

"Oh, Senor Reynolds," cried Luella, "let me go to my uncle and save you all this trouble."

"Nary a once! Sides, it's for Rock Randel we are working. Thar, I must go."

Quickly refitting the temporary partition into its place, and seeing that he had left it all right, Gil hurried back to the side of Reckless Ray.

At that moment the outer door fell with a crash!

CHAPTER XII.

THE NIGHT TRAMP.

"Now for hot work!" exclaimed Gil Rey.

As another yell of triumph came from the Mexicans they rushed into the house.

Springing each to one side of the inner door that they knew could not long withstand the blows of the Greasers, our mountaineers prepared for hand-to-hand fighting.

"Gi'n it to 'em like live coals!" gritted Reynolds, or Gil Rey as he was generally called.

"Reckless Ray ain't forgot Jim and Paul and Rock yet," replied that worthy, evidently forgetting his wound in his excitement.

Before they could say more the door was thrown from its hinges half-way across the room.

"Ki-yi-ahh!" bellowed the horde. But, as they plunged across the threshold, Reynolds and Ray swept down the foremost with their powerful blows.

The apartment quickly filled, however, and the hardy twain were surrounded and in close quarters.

"Yield, and we will spare your lives," cried St. Cassa.

"Lives be hanged!" snorted Gil Rey. "Hyer yer go!" and still his strong arm wielded his clubbed rifle till only its barrel was left in his hands.

Ray fought equally as bravely, but, weak from his old wounds, he was poorly fitted to cope with such fearful odds, and a furious stroke from the Mexican leader felled him to the floor, where he lay senseless, if not lifeless.

With the fall of his companion and the loss of his weapon, Gilman Reynolds was pressed back to the wall till, closing in hand-to-hand with a brawny Pelado he, too, was overpowered.

"Bind them!" commanded St. Cassa.

In spite of his frantic struggles the old mountaineer was soon securely bound.

"Hi, Senor St. Cassa, this American little needs the rope," said one of the Greasers, pointing to Ray. "He is much dead now. See!"

"Ha-ha! the dog is done for! Well, let his carcass remain there. We will find Rock Randel and that girl."

They searched for them, but it was time fruitlessly spent. They could not find either, or any trace of them.

Chagrined over this bootless victory, St. Cassa was finally obliged to give up.

"We will take that hound down to the old keep and put him under strong guard to-night. In the morning he shall be shot as a traitor."

Knowing the folly of pleading for freedom, Gil Rey allowed himself to be borne away in silence.

The prison-house was near the center of the village, and as the mountaineer was thrust within its damp walls his heart sunk like lead, brave and strong-hearted as he was. To die at sunrise! Ay, he could not hope to greet his loving wife again. And what would be her fate? and that of the poor girl with her? Then, as he thought of the death of Ray and Rock-Rock, hold! that name gave him hope! But, alas! he was undoubtedly dead. Filled with such conflicting thoughts the hours dragged heavily away.

Outside the building a strong guard kept their vigil, making an escape for the prisoner seem impossible.

Quiet soon settled upon Taos, and its people appeared to be sleeping as calmly as if the exciting scenes we have recorded had never occurred.

In his home old St. Cassa was fretting and fuming most bitterly; while San Mallre was suffering and groaning from his wound that was both deep and painful, but not likely to prove fatal.

Midnight.

No one was seen moving in the dark streets of Taos, and even the prison-guards stood listlessly at their posts.

"Down (hic) the cen-en-ter! (hic), Han's (hic) cross!"

"You (hic), Ja-ake! (hic)."

The drowsy sentinels started in surprise, to behold one of the most ragged and squalid specimens of humanity they had ever seen coming down the street, reeling from side to side, threatening to fall at every step.

In fact, at that instant, he went headlong to the earth, and it was not until he had rolled over several times and made repeated attempts that he regained anything like an upright position.

"I say (hic), old feller, ain't (hic) ain't (hic) these yearth (hic) m-i-ght (hic) y onsartin?" he muttered, as he stood staggering to and fro as trying to keep his feet.

The guard who had discovered him quickly apprised his companions, and in an instant all were intently watching the drunken stranger's antics.

Bracing himself as best he could the wretch again pitched his voice to a high, drawing key and began anew what he evidently considered singing:

"Now you go (hic) all right ahead,

Bw—

It was 'right ahead' three times his length, leaving him sprawling upon the earth.

The watchers were convulsed with laughter, and as their merry peals rang out on the air, the stranger rolled over and starting up on his knees, glared around to exclaim:

"Hil Mister (hic) To—a—d; you sing purty (hic) loud. But I ken clear (hic) ye out. Lem—ane (hic) try!"

"Huir I kem, Betty, a-fly (hic)," and brandishing his arms in the air he again measured his form on the ground, coming by this time within a few feet of the nearest sentinel.

Giving expression to a prolonged grunt, he lay in a quivering heap, until the spectators, unable to stifle their merriment, again broke into a ringing peal of laughter, when he started up on one elbow, and staring vacantly around, exclaimed at last:

"Wal, snakes! ef my old throat (hic) warn't so stiff I'd (hic) beat y'all to flinders! Beller away, ye great lumpin' toads, I'll (hic) ile my old mashine (hic) and try ye ag'in (hic)!"

Hereupon the speaker displayed a dark, suspicious-looking bottle, and was in the act of raising it to his mouth, when he uttered a cry of alarm, and seemed to see the guards for the first time.

"Hi, old bosses, how kem ye hyar? and whar did ye kem from ennyway? Reckon, (hic) I'm en a spree! Kem 'lone; wanted sum solitute. Glad to see yer. Can't ye gi'n a feller yer paw? Thought I'd put up to this ho-arvern a spell! got the toads hyur! Ole frisky every pop. Sich es Bill Williams—"

Whatever else he intended to add he failed to articulate, but holding the bottle to his lips, a low, gurgling sound drowned his speech.

The guards looked upon each other, and then toward the drunken vagabond with a strange, unnatural light gleaming from their eyes.

CHAPTER XIII.

INTO A PIT!

"Hi, old toads, (hic) elp yourself. This old man ain't no (hic) half-way 'oss! 'Sides, 'tain't every time he hez sick company (hic) come to see'd him," and the speaker held out the "pizen" to the guards. "Corral 'im big."

The temptation was too great for one, and he gladly seized the proffered bottle, to drain a hearty draught of the fiery liquor.

The ice broken another quickly followed the example, followed by a third, and so on, until all but one had drank heartily of the benzine.

"Hil you one big temperance toad!" grunted the stranger.

"Ar— you one big mistake! Gi'n me the peppermint," and he outstretched an arm for the bottle.

Once they had tasted of the liquor the others were not disposed to give it up, but all were eager for another drink, and soon began to struggle among themselves for the possession of the decanter.

The one who had refused to imbibe interposed in vain. His companions seemed crazed.

"Hil go it, old toads, and I'll 'old the stakes!" cried the owner of the bottle. "I'll risk the joog all to flinders. Hi!" and he rolled to and fro in wild glee.

The conduct of his friends seemed to alarm the temperate Mexican, and he, too, became excited as he tried to quiet them.

The stranger grew extremely pleased, and rolled about more wildly than ever.

"Hi, sweet toads! pile in on purty (hic), and I'll sing you a bran blow-up new song."

Then, essaying to gain his feet, evidently that he might use his vocal powers to better advantage, he staggered into the very midst of the noisy guards.

"Hil ye make too much bumble-bee! All Taos'll hear ye, and be on our heels."

As he spoke every vestige of intoxication suddenly left him, for he dealt stunning blows right and left with lightning-like rapidity.

The guards fell to the earth with groans, and as the last Greaser lay senseless, the victor glanced hastily around, and then began to search the captain of the guard.

A minute later he held up before his sparkling eyes a bunch of keys.

"Ho—ho!" he laughed, softly, "'em's the chaps for bizness. Ef I don't risky ye, Gil, old beaver, in less than a jiffy, my name ain't Rock Randel!"

The ragged veteran was none other than our hero in disguise.

"Hope ye'll pardon me for savring ye so, my Greasers; but I guess 'em drops o' that bottle kinder made my fists strike easy."

Without further delay he hurried toward the old jail, and soon he had found a key that would fit the rusty lock, when the ponderous door swung open at his touch.

Groping his way along the dark corridor, he called the name of his friend, to receive a glad reply.

"Hold up a jiffy, and I'm thar, old hoss."

Finding a key that would unlock the door to Reynolds's cell, Rock was soon by his side.

"Wal, old boy, gittin' punished fer your sins? Thought mebbe ye'd like company."

"Is that you, Rock, old goat?"

"I reckon. But I s'pose ye are fettered like a tame sheep, so let me free ye, for 'taint safest for us to build our nest hyar."

Randel was not long in freeing Gil's limbs, and as soon as he was at liberty the old mountaineer sought to gain his feet which caused him considerable pain after the long time he had been in a cramped position.

"They sed ye had gone under," he declared, grasping his rescuer's hand with a hearty grip.

"How'd ye gi'n 'em the slip?"

"Slick es a long-eared goat w'u'd drink old rye out o' a squ re-necked bottle. I hev seen more fun than ye c'u'd shake a pronged stick at. Been through a regular stunner of a stand-up and clip at, and was driv like a toad under an old shanty, when the hull consarn was torn down and toted off fer kindling wood. I found an old holler log under that and crawled into it so when they rolled the stick off I went with it. Jeems Stopple! I war madder nor a stung hornet the way they banged that wood round, but I kep' mum all the same."

"Es soon es I dared I crawled out and begun to prospect round, to find ye in this predimiciny, when I rigged and playing 'possum with a black bottle on the Greasers outside, hyar I am. But how is Miss Luella?"

In a few hurried words Gil Rey told of the situation he had been torn from at home.

"Wal, we must huff it like hot shot. Foller me!"

As they reached the open air the tramp of feet was heard, and in an instant a body of men came in sight.

"Rocker Mountains!" ejaculated Reynolds, "our game is up!"

"It's the relief guard!" whispered Rock; "mebbe we can give 'em the slip. Run this—"

The air rang with startling cries, and the two friends knew they were discovered.

"Quick! this way for your life!" hissed Rock, and he dashed around the corner of the building.

The yelling Mexicans followed in furious pursuit.

"The whole of Taos will be on our heels!" panted Randel, "and we hev got to huff it like fire on glass!"

Of course Gil Rey was unarmed, and Rock had only a pair of revolvers, but they had a fair start of their foes with an even chance of escape.

Randel was a fleet runner while his companion was still able to do "sum tall work."

Down the street they fled with the horde of Mexicans at their heels.

Soon the main part of the settlement was passed, and seeing only an open country ahead, Rock cried:

"Git for the right and we'll steer for the growth yonder."

As he spoke he turned an abrupt angle, and leaping a pile of rubbish that lay by the street side near one of the above houses, he started to run across the adjacent clearing.

He had gone less than six rods, however, when a sharp cry left his lips, and he suddenly disappeared as if the earth had opened and swallowed him up.

Gil Rey paused in dismay ere he reached the spot, just as a terrific noise nearly stunned him.

The ground had seemed to recede from him, and with trembling steps he advanced a short distance, when he saw what sent a thrill of horror through his frame.

Rock had fallen into a well or sort of pit and the earth had caved in upon him!

He shouted his friend's name, unmindful of the close proximity of his enemies, but no response came.

Merciful Power! Had he been crushed to death?

CHAPTER XIV.

RECKLESS RAY'S WOOING.

GIL REY was given little time for examination, but he saw enough to satisfy him that Rock Randel had been covered with depth of earth which would have crushed out of existence a score of men had they been there.

The near approach of the Mexicans warned him to flee if he valued his own life, and with a wild cry of hatred against his foes, he resumed his race.

As the Greasers reached the spot that had proved so fatal to poor Rock, they paused and the night air was made hideous by their cries of exultation.

"The American cur is forever out of our way," declared the leader. "But we must not allow the other to escape."

Their brief halt, however, proved the salvation of Gil.

When they again continued the chase he had gained a distance they could not retrieve, and reaching the growth a little later, the mountaineer had only to exercise some of his woodcraft to elude his hated followers.

It was not till well toward morning, though, that he dared return to his home; and then as he drew near, a dread foreboding filled his heart.

What had befallen his wife and Luella? And was Ray dead?

Not a sign of life was apparent, and after taking a careful survey and seeing that his way was clear he cautiously advanced, to meet with a glad scene within the house.

Dolores and Luella had remained in their place of concealment until satisfied that their foes had all departed when fearing that something had happened to Gil and Ray they came out, to find the latter suffering from his wounds and the former missing.

Ray's wounds were dressed and he became quite comfortable, while trying to cheer up the women with the encouragement that Gil would soon come back.

The mountaineer's appearance was hailed with unbounded joy; and when the greeting was over he was plied with questions concerning his adventures.

"Are ye sure that Rock has gone under?" asked Ray anxiously, as the other concluded his thrilling recital.

"W'u'd ye call yerself done for ef ten feet o' yearth lay on yer carcass, Reckless Ray! It makes this beaver feel a heap like turning squaw and crying, but he knows poor Rock has fit his last foul and has turned up his toes. He was a proper lad and it's ag'in the grain o' Gilman Reynolds to stand by and see 'em Greasers wring him the cold deal. But Rocker Mountains! it's a heap good to know they didn't get his top-knot."

"As soon as I can handle my old shooter 'em yaller varmints shall pay my leggins full o' skulps for that job!" declared the impetuous Ray.

"Hyar's my paw on that, old beaver," cried the other. "But jess at present I more'n s'pect we have our hands full to look arter our own bar'r."

Day soon dawned, and during its long hours that wore tediously away our friends dared not show themselves.

Time and again they trembled, as they saw parties of Mexicans passing, lest they should be discovered.

"Two'n do for us to stay here any longer than dark," decided Gil. "'Em coyotes 'll smell us out in spite o' creation."

"But whar can we go?"

"I hev a friend who lives 'bout five miles east o' Taos whar we can stop in peace. D'y'e think ye'd stand the journey, Ray?"

"I reckon."

"And ye'll go with us, Miss Lu?"

"It will cause you too much trouble. I have friends at St. Cristola where I wish to go."

"Then ye don't tend to go back to your uncle's?"

"I had rather die! No; I must get to my friends in St. Cristola."

"Then it's settled. Ye go with us to Tom Daniels's; and arter that I will guide you to your folks."

"Oh thank you, Senor Reynolds. You are indeed kind."

Gil Ray was the owner of two horses, and not far from midnight he led the animals to the door.

Ray was then assisted into the saddle of one; and Dolores and Luella were seated upon the back of the other.

With a farewell look at the home they were leaving perhaps never to see again they started on their way.

The journey proved a hard one to Ray.

The old mountaineer led his horse, and guided him along as carefully as possible, but the other's suffering was very great.

At last, however, to the joy of all they reached their destination in safety.

As soon as the surprised Daniels learned their story his welcome was a hearty one.

"Yes; you shall stay here till the storm has blown over. So don't you think but you are all right."

The next day Ray's wounds were so bad that he could hardly move.

It seemed to afford him great pleasure to have Luella by his side; and she appeared to have forgotten her resolve to start to her friends that day as she tried to make his sufferings less.

When she did speak of it, Ray requested her to stay longer, and she was fain to yield, particularly when the others seemed desirous, too.

Thus a week sped past—seven of the happiest days Reckless Ray had ever known.

Reared among the rude mortals who inhabited the plains and the mountains, he had never felt the milder influences of life—had never known what it was to feel the touch of a woman's loving hand and listen to her sweet words of comfort.

Ere half the time had passed he felt that he could not live without the presence of the fair Luella.

Under her tender care he mended rapidly, and declared that he would soon be well.

She never appeared happier than when by his side.

The only shadow that darkened their existence was the untimely fate of poor Rock.

Ray had felt for him the affection of a brother and his death was a sad blow.

Luella, too, had admired the brave, honest-hearted hunter, who had risked so much for her.

Toward the close of the seventh day as Ray and Luella chanced to be together, as they were much of the time, he said:

"Luella, must you leave us to-morrow as you talk?"

"I must, Senor Ray. Shall you miss me so much?"

"Miss you, Luella? should we miss the sun from our day? Luella, I love you, as you must already know. Don't turn yer purty head away. I know I'm a rough chap who hain't been nobody nor nothin', but I love ye jess as much as the biggest swell in the world. Kem say the word and we'll be hitched, and my home shall be your home. I'll squat up the valley hyar and we'll chip in like beavers. D'y'e'gree, Luella?"

"Are you sure you would not tire of me and seek some other—"

"Throw up yer hand ter wunst! Reckless Ray never went back on a pard, and he would be rubbed out a hundred times afore he'd slip ye."

"I trust you," she replied softly, "and I am yours."

"Hooray! I'm the fattest coon this side the Missouri! Gi'n me yer purty hand, my rosebud. We'll jine to-morrow, and as soon as my wounds are well we'll pull for Fernandez valley."

In the midst of their unbounded bliss a shadow fell across the threshold of the open door, and they looked up to utter cries of the greatest amazement.

CHAPTER XV.

ROCK RANDEL!

THE simple utterance left the lips of Reckless Ray:

"Rock Randel!"

"Jeems Stoppable!" was the only answer. Then a minute's silence followed that seemed to hush everything.

"Oh, Senor Randel, they said you were dead!" cried Luella, the first to recover her self-possession; and rememtoring her embarrassing position by the side of Ray she started forward, freeing her hand from the gentle hold of her lover.

"Luella! Ray! Are my peepers open? or hev I fell into another well and instead of seeing stars hav gone whar they are?"

"Rock, is that ye or yer speerit?" almost gasped Ray, who could not credit his own senses.

"It's Rock Randel every drag, old coon. Or at least all thar am left o' him," and our hero crossed the floor to the side of his friend and grasped his hand.

"Here's a paw fer ye, Lu, and I'm a heap glad to see ye."

Luella placed her own soft palm on the extended one of Rock's, and as she gazed into his honest, manly face she felt thrilled with an indescribable pleasure.

Rock, how you have changed since we saw you last! A wild, haggard look rests upon your face, and when you step you actually reel in your gait.

Several minutes passed before either found the will to speak.

"How in all the seven ages do I find ye hyar?" asked Rock, in evident surprise.

"We have been hyar a week."

"Beat me a ran-tattoo on a dry cottonwood, ef I didn't s'pose ye'd all gone to the starry regions. I'm cl'an crazy. You must tell the game, and I'll bet ye hev sum tall doin's to spot."

"We must hev your yarn fust, Rock."

"I—Whoop! ef here ain't Gil big as natural and three times as lively, may I be sky to—" and the usually stoical mountaineer fairly leaped into the air as he turned to meet the other.

Gil Ray's surprise was far greater than Ray's. He almost started to retreat.

"It must be your spirit, old hoss!" he exclaimed.

"Hooray! do spooks generally cavort round and holler like a mad Pawnee? Gi'n me yer paw and I'll show ye a grip no spook ever thought of."

Seeming convinced by such conclusive arguments the ex-hunter hesitated no longer to meet his friend with an affectionate greeting.

"But, Rock, hev ye a charmed life? I am impatient to know how ye are hyar alive, and smashin' 'bout when I left ye with ten feet o' Taos yearn on ye!"

"Gil, I hev spotted the tallest trail and the biggest doin's ye ever heerd on. That hunt me and Kit Carson had through the fire canyon don't beat it!"

"Ye are a tall one, Rock, old beaver, and ef I do say it, ye'll go whar any one can and not git yer top-knot sizzled, wagh! But roll out your doin's, old hoss, while the wimmers are fixin' up sum grub."

"Start yer mule afore I'm throwed," urged Ray.

In answer to the repeated request, Rock, after Tom Daniels had joined them, accounted for his past week's adventures as follows:

"Somehow my head-piece ain't jess clear, but mayhap I can leave a trail ye'll understand. The fustest I knowed when I slapped inter that well war more'n a ten million thousand baskets full o' stars a-dodgin' round my ears and eyes, and a-stingin' me like all possessed with red-hot tooth-prickers. Then I squarmed, and my roaring catamounts, warn't there an' arthquake a-sendin' piles and heaps o' piles of dirt and rocks about my head?"

"My eyes gi'n out and the next I knowed I didn't know my nose from a grindstone!"

"By and by I sort o' came back to Rock, old coon, and that I war. Thar warn't any water in the well, and I found I had fallen in among a lot o' tim'ers and old rubbish that had been throwed in the place, and that for all I knowed a million thousand cart-loads o' dirt lay above me."

"Course I must hev had somethin' to breathe and I could jess' see a faint streak o' this world a-lookin' down on me by the side o' one o' the tim'ers that lay kind o' cater o' corner like, and I c'u'd feel the blessed air on my nose."

"That gi'n me hope and I tried to move."

"Gulf o' Mexiker! I moughtes well hev tried to start the Rocker Mountains with a mule-eared gopher! Thar I war and that I seemed bound to stay. One o' the biggest tim'ers had fell square 'cross me and I war fast as a dead Injun froze to the earth."

"Howsomever, I managed to free my paws arter a time; but that war all I c'u'd do."

"I found my knife war in my belt, and knowing no one wu'd be likely to dig me out, I went to work a-cuttin' that stick away."

"Ye may believe that war no leetle job, and what I suffered ye can never realize, so I sha'n't try to tell ye."

"I didn't do much hollerin' for I didn't s'pect it wu'd make a heap sight difference for me, I saved my strength to fight my own battle, though ye may believe I didn't feel very independence then."

"Wal, they say everything has an end but a mule's kickin', and at last I had made that stick into whittlings and crammed 'em down side o' me."

"Then I began to dig my way up through the dirt, letting it fall down to my feet as I riz."

"I reckon I must hev stayed a hull day in that old well, for when I kem out 'twas night and I am sartin' t'wa'n't the same one that I left when I made that tumle."

"I never felt meaner since I war picked up on Rock Randel when I war a younger, and es I c'u'dn't see nary Greaser round I didn't hurry bout goin' away."

"When I did I poked up to your old shebang, Gil, and ye may judge ov my mystification when I c'u'dn't find ye."

"I helped myself to sumthin' to eat and the did me a mile o' good."

"Then, s'posin' ye war all gobbed up by the yaller varmints, I begun to look for ye."

"While I war 'plorin' Taos slick some o' the coyotes smelled me out, and I hev seen some tall times since."

"They kem pesky near corraling me three times, but I have kept my eye-teeth peeled and no old well ain't gobbled me up. Reckon when Rock Randel digs his own funeral in that way ag'in he won't wear any brain-piece."

"Sam Mulre is on his pins ag'in, and old St. Cassa is jess ravin' like a mad buffer in fly-time. The hull o' Taos is up on their shooters, and I tell ye thar am a big smell o' brimstun. I tell ye thar's a heap o' Greaser meat gone wolfin'."

"Somehow my keepin' ain't 'greed with me, and it got so hot in Taos I concluded to get a new boardin'-place."

"I s'posed, o' course, ye all had gone under, so I gi'n the varmints the slip last night, and thought I'd jess give Tom hyar a visit. So that's my yarn, and a properer glad coon ye never see'd to find we have all turned up so slick."

"I'm mad with myself, old boss, to think I didn't go back to that well and pull ye out. But I felt sart'in you war goner sure. In fact, I knowned it!"

"Whoop! thar am the sign for grub and I'm a heap gaunt. Sides, I want to speak to the gal, and I know she's hankering for me to be sociable, so 'scuse me, old pard."

Thus, even surrounded by danger, the light-hearted party passed a time of joy and gladness, forgetting in their merriment the adventures and sufferings they had so lately escaped.

CHAPTER XVI.

BEARTS AT STAKE.

WITH the advent of Rock at the ranch of Tom Daniels affairs seemed to present a new aspect.

Randel, to use his own expression, was "used up a heap," and he spent three days of quiet living at his new home.

Ray had said nothing to Rock about his proposed marriage, but he had purposely delayed the happy event, so that his friend could be present.

During the interval it would be hard to say who occupied the most of Luella's time, for she, a bit conscious of her charms, (and what maid is not?) delighted to be the pet of either, nor could she very well avoid it had she so chosen, for when one was not by her side the other was sure to be.

She had confessed to love Ray, and Rock—well, her hand was promised to the first and the pretty Lu, vain though she may have been, was not flirt enough to break her promise, nor cruel enough to wantonly wrong either.

We suspect it would be a difficult task to portray the feelings of our heroes, and lest we might fail shall not attempt it.

They who had been warm friends for years began to mistrust each other. Only the strong tie that had existed between them kept them from an open quarrel.

Somehow Rock, honest Rock, could not bear to see his companion even gaze at the lovely Mexican girl without experiencing a feeling he had never felt before. And Ray? well, what

we have said of the other applied equally say true in regard to him.

Thus, while they both gained rapidly in strength, and at the end of the time were comparatively well and strong bodily, their minds were weak and confused.

Perhaps Rock was far the greater sufferer in this respect, for while Ray really believed his case was certain, his rival was still in suspense as to his fate.

"Tain't any use to let the game eat all the bait afore the trap springs," said the last to himself, undoubtedly a dozen times, "and I'm goin' to spring the pole this minnit."

But he failed to do it, and saw opportunity after opportunity lost, for Rock was a slow-worded lover.

The crisis came at last.

He had been out for a short ramble, and when returning was the witness to a scene that aroused the slumbering fire of his nature.

Ray and Luella were holding one of their fond meetings, and as Rock caught sight of them he was in the act of kissing her willing lips.

Spirits of the departed! Rock Randel staggered to one side in speechless rage.

Crushing down his fast rising, jealous anger, he strode into the apartment, to the great embarrassment of the lovers. Rock, rough and unknown to the milder elements of life as he was, was too much of a gentleman, however, to "raise a scene" in the presence of ladies, and thus he greeted all with a tone that told not of the storm to come.

Half an hour later he stood with Ray outside the ranch, and when satisfying himself they were alone, he turned upon his companion with the startling words:

"Ray, the time has come! I knowed it would!"

"What time has come? Must we git from hyar?"

"That's it, Ray, old hoss. One o' us must git! It's ag'in' my nature to corral any game that don't belong to me, so I say let the stick be set square, and the way it floats I will go."

Ray was puzzled for a moment, but he seemed to divine the drift of his companion's speech as he said:

"Does it consarn Luella, old pard?"

"I reckon," was the terse reply.

After a painful pause, the other asked:

"Can't ye git her up? or must we leave it out to these?" and he tapped his fire-arms significantly.

Rock shook his head. To speak the truth he could not think of fighting his friend, and yet—

"I s'pose it must be, old coon. I can't think o' losing the gal. At least, I can't be round and see any one else hev her—not even you, Ray."

"I'm in the same predicamony, Rock. I think she is sweet on me, too." Ray had not the heart to tell the whole truth.

"On ye, old hoss! Ye hev follered a blind trail! It's me she is arter. I hev seen her purty eyes tell me so more times than you c'u'd sling the Gulf o' Mexicer at a live toad by the handful. I am sart'in o' thet, my boy."

Ray almost smiled, then he felt his self-possession fast leaving him, as he saw the other's apparent certainty.

Had Luella been false to him?

"Look hyar, Rock Randel, it's you and me. But one o' us can hev the gal, that is es sart'in es we see the sun setting now. Which shall we do; leave it to the gal, or fight it out like men?"

Rock moved uneasily.

"Ray," he said, at last, "ef any other chap had asked me that question, I w'u'd hev shoudered my shooter and told him to foller me, and but one o' us w'u'd kem back, and he w'u'd hev the gal in peace. But I can't say it to ye. We hev been brothers, and we can be friends, let kem what may. Let's leave it to the gal. If she says *you*, I will heel and toe it for the mountains with nary a word."

How could he have spoken nobler?

Reckless Ray, knowing the advantage he had, hesitated ere he replied. It cut him to deceive his friend so, but he felt he had gone too far to back out.

"What do ye say?" asked his companion impatiently. "Are ye willing to leave it with the gal?"

"Rock, are ye sure ye'll be my friend if she takes me?"

"D've think I am a coyote, Ray! I hed ruther go under than to lose her, but ef she says yes to ye, I will never complain. Ye shall find me your bestest pard."

"Good, Rock," replied Ray, with great emotion. "Gi'nus yer paw, and then we'll find her."

A few minutes later they stood in the presence of her who had been the innocent cause of so much anxiety.

"Ye must do the talkin', Rock," said Ray, as they approached her.

Rock would fain have had it different, but there was no time to escape the inevitable, and he found himself in an extremely uncomfortable situation.

"Miss Luella," he began nervously, "me and Ray hev an important question to ax ye. The fact is we—that is, I—no Ray and—"

Here he broke completely down in confusion.

"What is it you'd say, Senor Randel?" she asked pleasantly.

"Say? Tree a coon up a cottonwood! which'll ye hev, him or me?"

"I—I don't understand you, Senor Randel. Would you have me choose between you and a coon for—"

"Oh, Jeems Stopple! I didn't mean *that!* I meant which w'u'd ye hitch to—me or Ray? We are both ov us dying for ye to say yes!"

Comprehending with woman's wit the state of affairs, Luella was speechless with amazement.

"Don't be afeerd to spit it out. We are on the square. Rock Randel loves ye better than he does his own life, and so does Ray. Now 'tis for ye to choose and t'other 'll say nary word."

Realizing his earnestness and the consequences pending upon her decision, Luella could not find power to utter the words for several minutes, and not till the impatient lovers moved restlessly and Rock was about to speak again, then her tone was hardly audible:

"It pains me more than you can know to disappoint you, Rock, and you are a dear friend to me. But Ray must have told you that *I promised my hand to him three days ago, and we are to be wed to-morrow!*"

CHAPTER XVII.

OLD FOES AGAIN.

Rock reeled back as if shot, and every particle of color forsook his face.

"Say that ag'in, Luella," he gasped. "I didn't understand you."

"I have promised to marry Ray," she replied.

"Promised to marry Ray!" he repeated gazing from one to another in blank amazement.

Ray started forward, crying:

"Hyar, Rock, send your knife up to Green River * in my carcass! I hev deceived ye worse nor a Digger Injin!"

Rock stood in wonder.

"Wipe me out quick!" continued Ray. I hev played the meanest kind of 'possum, while ye hev been right on the square!"

"Have you promised to hitch to Ray, Luella?" Rock asked.

She bowed her head seeming too full for utterance.

"And you were in 'arnest?"

Again she bowed.

"Then I ar'n't the 'coon to turn Injin. Ray, I don't go back on my pledge. Gi'n me yer paw," and as his overjoyed companion complied with the request, the honest Rock took it in his own, where he held it in a warm grasp of friendship for several moments, then he said:

"Let me take yours, Luella," and when he had cordially held hers a minute, he placed it in the palm of her accepted lover, saying as he united them:

"Now may you ever live like bees in clover. And if you have time atween your honey-making jess think o' Rock Randel soft like, and remember wherever he am he knows you as a true friend does. Scuse these eyes o' mine, but somehow they seem weak to-day," and unable to stay the tears that would come, he turned away to hide his true feelings.

"Ye are a booby, Rock, to play woman so, and ye ain't fit to be called a mountain man," he muttered, as he sought his rifle in the corner.

"What, Rock, not going out a-hunting ag'in to-night?" asked Ray in surprise as he discovered the movement.

"I reckon. Mebbe I won't be in till mornin', so don't be alarmed. Good-day, old beaver, and you, Miss Lu, my purty angel, take good care o' the lad. Think kindly o' your friend. Good-by till we meet again."

There was something in Rock's manner that told more than his words, and as he strode out

* The hunters' knives were mostly made at the "Green River" works and had that name stamped on the blade. Hence to do anything effectually was, in mountain parlance, "up to Green River."

of the house with his rifle upon his shoulder, Ray bounded after him, crying:

"Rock, old hoss, ye mean to leave us, and never come back."

"Don't think hard, old pard, but I'm going to steer for the mountains. It will be beaver season now afore I can get to the grounds."

"But, Rock, ye must stay till Luella and me get settled."

Randel shook his head.

"I shall lose the best run o' game for the fall. Sides I ain't jess myself now. 'Twill be best so, Ray."

His friend saw his object and clasping his hand murmured a few words of friendship, and offered no further objection.

But Rock was destined to be governed by a power other than his own for once.

When Luella added her appeal to that of Ray's he could not resist longer.

"I'll give up to you, Lu, and will not think o' leaving you till I hev seen ye and Ray settled."

Thus Rock tarried another night at the ranch of Tom Daniels.

It was decided that Ray and Luella should go to the San Cristola Mission to be married, and that the journey should be performed on the following morning.

Accordingly, bright and early, the happy couple, accompanied by Rock and Gil Rey, started on their way.

Toward noon they came in sight of the old convent which stood in the midst of a grove of fruit trees, with its rude tower and cross reaching far above them, the whole contrasting strangely with the lonely wildness of the surrounding country.

The Mission was built after the style of most monastic buildings of the world. Loopholes peered from its plastered walls and on a portion of the roof that seemed to have been flattened for that purpose was seen a small piece capable of carrying a two-pound ball that might prove a source of dread to any assailant in case of war.

Around the dismal-looking structure were scattered at different intervals huts of stone and adobe, sometimes thatched with flags and boughs, occupied by the Indians, half-breeds, and Mexicans that inhabited the vicinity, and who lived remarkably peaceful together.

The arrival of our party was hailed with no little wonder, but Gil Reynolds, who was on familiar terms with the priests there, soon made known their errand, when they were cordially welcomed to enter the convent.

Preparations were almost instantly entered upon for the performance of the ceremony as our friends were anxious to be again on their way.

The canonical inmates of the Mission consisted of but three, though in years before it had had many more.

Fra Ignacio Gomez delegated himself the pleasure of uniting the young couple, and they were requested to come forward.

Both seemed greatly agitated, but a whispered word of encouragement from Ray served to strengthen Luella.

Rock felt his heart sink like lead, and unable to witness the loss of her whom he could no longer hope to call his own, he turned aside, to leave the apartment.

The minutes were dragging themselves away with a weight that made them fearfully oppressive to him, when a loud clamor in the adjoining room caused him to start in wonder.

Glancing out of one of the loopholes, judge of his surprise to see two score of horsemen drawn up in front of the Mission.

A second look raised his surprise to consternation, as he saw that the leader of the armed cavalcade was San Mullre, his most dreaded foe!

"Reckon that's fun ahead," he muttered grimly. "I hate to disturb Ray, but they must be through by this time and he must know what is up."

At that moment he heard the Mexican demand admittance and then a wild shout rung on the air.

Hesitating no longer Rock bounded into the presence of his friends, and unheeding their looks of amazement, cried:

"Quick, Gil and Ray! San Mullre and all his coyotes are at the door, and we are corralled for sum o' the tallest kind o' war!"

Fra Ignacio turned pale with fright and wrung his hands with supplication of the most piteous kind.

"Quit, ye old Spaniard!" cried Rock. "Thar ain't any one to hurt yer old wizen pate. Look to your firearms, boys, and if need be don't waste any powder."

CHAPTER XV:II.

ROCK'S STRATAGEM.

MEANWHILE one of the priests with more presence of mind than the cowardly Ignacio possessed met the Mexican leader at the door and demanded of him what was wanted.

"Is there a party of Americans here?"

The padre answered affirmatively.

"We know it. And there is one Rock Randel among them whom we must have, dead or alive it don't matter which."

"And my niece, Luella St. Dell, is here, too, with them, most high and holy Fra Augustin," interposed St. Cassa.

The priest started with a glad cry as he recognized the other.

"There is a lady among them, Señor St. Cassa," he said.

"Tis she; and she must go home with me. She has run away from me."

"Yes, Father Augustin, you must deliver her up to us, and help us capture the American dog."

The priest seemed puzzled.

"Shall I speak to them?" he asked.

"Yes. Meanwhile, see that he don't escape, for he is a desperate man."

Augustin hastened on his errand, and a minute later stood before our friends.

"Your uncle would have you go home with him, fair lady," he said, suavely, to Luella.

"Oh, father, I cannot," she exclaimed, and clung more closely to the arm of Ray.

"You shall not, so never fear, dear one," the lover whispered.

"There is one of you, Señor Rock Randel, whom they want, too," Augustin said, turning to the men.

"I reckon ye needn't hev told me, for I knowned it straight ee a hitch in a beaver's eye," declared that worthy. "But why don't they kem and git me?"

"They are waiting for you to come out."

"Sho! Hey they got any provender with em! I reckon this old building'll rot to ashes afore I shall be so accomodatin' to that yaller-hided, saff'on-eyed, hump-nosed old tarnal of a Greaser poke! Jess tell 'em when Rock Randel kem to him it'll be heels fust. D'yeh yar!"

Father Augustin now joined Ignacio in his alarm. To speak the truth they knew the mountaineers were expert with the use of their firearms, and they feared them, while at the same time they dared not oppose the mob outside.

"Gi'n'em the verdict," said Rock, impatiently. But a new idea entered his head and he quickly added: "Wait! tell them Rock Randel wishes to talk with his friends a minute, jess long enough to say his prayers. Don't ye let one o' the varmints kem in. D'yeh yar? Ef ye do this old chap"—pointing to Ignacio—"dies the same minute, Talk out of the loopholes, and see that the door is bolted. D'yeh yar?"

"Hyar, Gil, ye stand over that old grizzly, and the instant ye hear one o' the coyotes step in the house, blow his brains into puddin'-dressin'. D'yeh yar? Thar's fun in the wind!"

"Oh—oh—oh!" groaned the terrified Ignacio, as Rock rattled off his speech and Reynolds prepared to carry out his order. "Spare me! spare me!"

"Shut up, ye old blue-nosed booby or I'll cram the Gulf o' Mexiker down yer hash alley!"

This effectually silenced the frightened priest, and Rock cried to the other:

"Why don't ye foller my directions? I'm cap'en o' this company? D'yeh hear? Thar they are pounding like all possessed! Tell 'em what I said."

The padre was too much frightened to reply, or hardly to move. He could hear his friends and members of the Mission in the adjoining part of the building, but he dared not call to them, or attempt any treachery on the reckless mountaineers. The critical situation of Fra Ignacio warned him that he had better obey the commands of Randel at the present, and trust for something to turn up in their favor.

Thus glad to escape, if only for a short time, the presence of our party, Augustin hurried toward the nearest loophole.

"Don't let them kill me!" groaned Gomez, suffering fearful mental agony, and unable to turn his tear-dimmed gaze from the ominous muzzle of Gil Rey's rifle staring him in the face.

"Look out for him, Gil," cried Rock. "Don't do any fooling. Hyar, Ray, foller me and we'll jess stir up sum uv the tallest kind uv fun! Don't ye git larmed, Lu, but stay hyar quiet like," and he dashed from the room followed by Ray.

Rock's first movement was to gain the outer door, and in the twinkling of an eye he slipped the ponderous bolt into its socket, when it would

have required the force of a dozen men to have burst the stout, oaken frame in.

"Now for the top o' the building and work."

The twain then began to look for the stairway, but in their excitement they could not find the place.

"Our beavers are all dogs!" exclaimed Ray.

"We are corralled in spite o' the dickens."

At this juncture Rock entered an apartment to the right, which they found filled with frightened females and men hardly less alarmed.

In an instant Rock resolved on his course of action.

Pausing abruptly before the first person he reached, who chanced to be a buxom lass of eighteen, he cried:

"Look hyar, gal! Jess show us the way to the top o' this shebang quicker'n a jiffy!"

The maiden was too amazed to speak.

"Quick, I say!" and Rock, by way of inducement, raised his rifle in a threatening manner.

This last seemed to tell her plainer than words what was demanded.

"Spare me, señors. Do you want to go to the tower?"

"Anywhere! only git to that big shooter on the roof."

"Si, señor; follow me," and waving her hand to the others the girl frightened half out of her wits hurried away, while Rock and Ray were not slow to follow.

Meanwhile the trembling Augustin had conveyed Rock's message to the impatient leaders of the mob outside.

"Fool!" cried San Mullre; "give the American dog no time to say his prayers. Open the door for us!"

"Ob—oh, señors! don't! They will kill Fra Ignacio!"

"Open the door or we will tear it down!" thundered Mullre.

But the priest was too terrified to move.

"The American will come in a—"

"Cospita! More likely he will escape! As long as you won't open the door we will break it in. Come on, men."

"Hold up thar! Don't be in sich a ternal stew, my boss toads. Jess stand whar ye are, or I'll blow ye clear into the corner o' the Parcifer sea!"

Startled by the menacing words, the horde glanced up to the top of the convent, to behold a sight which sent a chill of unutterable dread to their hearts and they stood as motionless as if transfixed.

Rock and Ray had gained the two-pound piece mounted upon the roof, and ranging it into their midst stood ready to send its fiery contents among them!

CHAPTER XIX.

LIVELY WORK.

"HOORAY!" cried Rock, excitedly, as he waved the match above his head. "I reckon we hev wrung a cold deal on ye this time, old yaller-skin!"

San Mullre gnashed his teeth in rage. Plainly enough he was caught.

"What are you going to do, American?" he asked, as soon as he recovered himself so he could speak.

"Do!" repeated Rock, coolly. "Wal, to speak the straight thing we ain't hardly decided whether to send ye to the Old Nick for kindlings, or to make mince-meat of ye for the buzzards. Ye are sure to git like hot pepper ef ye dare to squirm a budge."

"Do you hear that, Father Augustin?" asked St. Cassa. "Do you tamely submit to such an outrage from those dastardly Americans?"

"Oh! we shall all be killed!" groaned the priest.

"Open the door and we will make a rush to enter in spite of them," declared Mullre.

"Jess do it, saff'on-pate, ef ye want to go to kingdom come!" gritted Rock.

"You must not come in!" cried the padre.

"Oh, go away and let those dreadful men leave us alive!"

"Bah!" snorted Mullre. "Are you frightened out of your wits? No harm shall come to you, and once we are in the building we can rout those villains in a trice."

"But Father Ignacio will be killed!"

San Mullre raved worse than ever.

"Curses upon you! you are in league with them!"

Fra Augustin's sallow visage turned deadly pale as he listened to the insulting words, but he offered no retort.

Much as San Mullre desired it, he dared not move.

"Have we followed that dog all the way from

Taos to be cheated of his carcass?" he growled to St. Cassa.

"I fear so, unless we can manage to outwit him," replied the more self-possessed Mexican.

Then he began to question the padre more closely than Mullre had done, to learn of the true state of affairs within.

"It looks bad for us," he said to his companion. "We shall have to resort to desperate measures. I fear, I fear, to accomplish our purpose."

"Any thing to rid the world of that Rock Randel and gain possession of that girl."

"Look hyar," cried Rock, who had been watching them in silence, "we have fooled long enough. Now I will give you a chance to save yourselves, and ye can do jess as ye please."

"What is it?" asked old Cassa, eagerly.

"Jess levant. I will give you three minutes to decide whither ye'll go about your bizness and let us alone, or whither ye'll be blowed into kingdom come by this big pop-gun!"

"We deny your right to dictate terms to us," replied Mullre, savagely.

"Do as ye please, it will make nary difference in the end I kalkilate. We are in 'arnest, and if ye don't git afore two minutes more ye are a goner! Rock Randel and Reckless Ray don't fool with their foes."

The tone of the speaker told that he was terribly in earnest.

The Mexicans stared upon one another in amazement, and had they dared many would have fled.

Meanwhile events of equal importance were transpiring in the building.

Gil Rey had remained standing over the cowering Fra Ignacio watching him like the panther before his prey, while his hearing was strained to catch the sounds of the movements of his foes.

Luella stood by too confused to speak.

At the same time another of the padres had discovered the situation of affairs, and it was his work to stimulate action into the sluggish brains of the surrounding peons.

One of the bravest was given a lasso, and silently approaching the open door, he threw it dextrously about the old mountaineer's form.

Reynolds's quick ear caught the sound, and turned to discover his peril, but too late to escape it.

The coil fell about his shoulders, pinioning his arms to his side, and he was hurled violently to the floor.

With cries of exultation others sprung into the room, and he was quickly bound.

Though chafing to himself for his carelessness, it was too late to avail him of aught.

"Ho! fling open the door, Juan!" cried the lassoe, and the one addressed followed by the others sprung to obey.

Luella had presence of mind enough to understand the critical situation, and as the captors left Gil alone with her, and no one had seemed to notice her, she seized a knife lying on the floor and in an instant Gil was free.

"Bless ye, gal!" exclaimed Reynolds, and catching the knife from her hand he bounded to the outer door just as the peons had sprung the bolt and pulled it open.

"Quit that, ye thieves!" and he dashed into their midst sending them right and left.

A wild yell rung from the Mexicans outside as they saw the daring hunter appear in the doorway.

Those within rallied and Gil found all on hand that he could attend to.

At the time the Mexican was in the act of surprising Reynolds, to succeed in lassoing him, others of the Mission were cautiously creeping up the broad stairway, to overpower Rock and Ray.

The priest had laid his plans well, and for the time it seemed they would be successful.

The attention of the two friends held by those below on the ground, they failed to detect the sound of the cat like steps on the stairs.

Step by step the foes drew nearer.

Armed to the teeth, and with countenances gleaming with looks of malignant hatred, they were formidable adversaries.

Still the mountaineers were unconscious of danger.

They were holding the mob at bay in front, but how would they be able to grappled with those crouching behind?

The issue might have resulted different had it not been for the Mexican maid standing near by them and watching their movements with admiration.

Their manner and appearance seemed so noble to her, that she had forgotten the rude treatment Rock had hastily inflicted, and her sympathy was instantly given them.

She saw the sneaking Peladoes approaching, and it matters not whether her cry was caused by surprise at the Greasers' unexpected appearance, or whether she gave it purposely to warn the hunters as long as it discovered to them their situation.

"Hyar, Rock! the varmints are behind us!" and Ray turned impetuously to meet them.

Standing above the Greasers he had an advantage that he was not slow to improve.

As he swept his rifle about their heads, they uttered yell of terror and plunged pell-mell down the stairs.

"Whoop-hooray!" cried Ray, triumphantly.

"Look thar!" exclaimed Rock, excitedly pointing out upon the level expanse in front of the Mission.

CHAPTER XX.

THE WOLF RIDER'S MYSTERY.

SUDDENLY the scene was changed. From an unexpected source a new power intervened and ended the suspense to all. A new actor turned the tide of battle.

Wild yell of terror went up from the followers of San Mullre.

The priests of the convent turned deadly pale. The peons huddled together in groups.

The Wolf Rider was dashing into the midst of the Mexican throng!

Forgetting the ominous weapon pointed at them from the roof of the Mission, and alive only to the new danger which had so abruptly appeared, they broke and fled in mad confusion.

Upon their very heels rode the singular pursuer.

Mercy! A gleaming rifle-barrel quickly protruded from beside its form.

Spang! With a death-yell the hindermost fugitive fell.

The others expressed their terror in repeated shrieks that sounded far over the country.

Left alone, St. Cassa and San Mullre no longer dared to risk an attack from the mountaineers, and seeking their horses, sprung into their saddles to ride for the south.

Then the Wolf Rider turned from the terrified Greasers to face them.

Groans left the villains' lips.

San Mullre raised his rifle and fired. But his aim was unsteady, and as St. Cassa dashed forward at that moment, he received the bullet in his brain!

"For *Dios!* what have I done?" cried the amazed Mullre, as he saw his uncle fall.

Before he could say more, however, he felt a sharp, stinging sensation in his own body, and the report of a rifle again rung out.

"Not yet!" yelled the wounded Mexican.

Once more he raised his double-barreled weapon, and though he trembled in his seat, he did not fail this time.

A cry human in its tone, came from the wolfish equestrian, and in a moment the mustang was riderless.

San Mullre's own high-mettled steed plunged more furiously forward, and falling upon its withers he was borne swiftly away, disappearing soon from sight.

Rock and Ray, who had thus far been inactive witnesses, now started up.

"Thar goes old Wolf," cried the first. "Kem, Ray, we mustn't stand byar like 'suckles on Pike's Peak. Let's git below."

When they reached the lower story they found the padres and their flock huddled together still under the influence of their fright.

Luelia came forward crying:

"I am so glad you have not been hurt."

"All right, Lu," answered Rock; "but you must excuse us for a few minutes as we are pesky anxious to see bout that chap in the wolf-skin."

Randel and his companions reached the stranger a moment later, and expecting what he should find he seized hold of the hide and pulled it from the form wrapped within, when they saw a human figure!

"Jess es I expected," exclaimed Rock, "and he ain't dead either."

The man, who was past the prime of life, did move, but it was very feebly.

"Are they gone?" he asked.

"I reckon, ef ye mean the Greasers," replied Rock.

"Yes, the Greasers! Where am I?" he then cried, starting up.

His eyes were wild and bloodshot and his haggard face was of an ashen hue.

"Don't worry 'bout your g'ografey," said Randel.

"Here I am! here, Sarene, Amil, Juan! my wife, my daughter, my son! See! they flee!

they fall! the cowardly Greasers! I have slain them all! I swor—"

With the sentence unfinished he fell back and expired.

"He's gone on his long trail sure. But who can he be?"

From the mysterious unknown the three mountaineers turned to St. Cassa to find him dead.

"Wal, these are hard doings, Ray," said Rock, as they turned back to the convent, "and that's been a heap o' blood spilt, good and bad, since we struck the Taos trail."

"Right, old boss; but I guess we are nigh on to the end o' it. Who can that old chap he been in that wolf-skin?"

"He was a man named Leon St. Verneer, and he was crazy. Report says his wife and two children were killed by a party of Peladoes, and that the blow deprived him of his mind. He has lived at the old hut near the Taos trail, and disguised in that strange garb, hunted the race that murdered his family till they became in constant dread of him."

Thus spoke Fra Augustin.

They buried him and St. Cassa that day.

We will say here that the only explanation Rock and Ray ever had concerning the mysterious firing of the former's rifle was that, wishing to drive them from his house, crazy St. Verneer had, when they were a few minutes absent from the room, loaded the weapon with a dozen or more charges of powder, using for wadding the dry fungus of an old stump all rammed down well, and a live coal was dropped in upon top. Once the firing had commenced and it would not cease until the last charge had been spent.

The friends staid several days at the Mission, and before they left there was a double wedding!

Now don't look surprised, gentle reader, and begin to whisper strange things.

The truth was, fair Luelia loved Rock from the first, and it was not until she supposed him dead that she promised her hand to Ray for whom she had a decided liking. She was too honorable then to retract her pledge, and had not Ray realized what it was costing her and Rock to make the sacrifice, though he did not make the discovery until he found another more dear to him, their lives would have lost the happiness that was afterward theirs.

Rock thus received his reward, and Ray became the proud husband of the maid who saved his life on the house-top.

Luelia explained to Rock and Ray her disappearance from the lone cabin.

While the two latter were having their "circus" with the rifle, San Mullre, who had tracked her there, slew Mountain Jim and bore her away.

She had no chance to cry out and only the opportunity to drop the paper that ultimately led to her rescue from the hands of her persecutors.

Ray returned to Taos with his wife and lived there several years, happy and contented.

Rock finding that he had more foes in the place than was policy for one to meet, finally went to Shelby county, Texas, where he settled down to become one of the central actors in scenes wilder and more exciting than any he had ever seen.

San Mullre again tried to hunt him and the two for a time were squarely pitted against each other, but Rock's superior skill and bravery triumphed at last.

(il Rey finally sought once more the excitement of a mountain life.

THE END.

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